UNDERSTANDING SUPPORTIVE EMPLOYMENT AND JOB TRAINING IN CANADIAN SOCIAL PURPOSE ENTERPRISES: DRAWING FROM THEORIES OF SOCIAL SUPPORT

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

This thesis contains three papers that examine the socially supportive experiences of working at social purpose enterprises across Canada. The first paper presents a mixed-methods study exploring the range of work-centered social supports that can be part of the social purpose enterprise experience. From the perspective of managers and supervisors of these organizations, it explores the potential influence of these supports on the work outcomes and overall wellbeing of participants who often face significant and multiple barriers to employment.

From the perspective of employees and job training participants, the second paper quantitatively examines the influences of practical and emotional social support on changes in participants’ personal and vocational wellbeing during their time at the social purpose enterprises. Through participants’ own personal accounts, the final paper explores the nature and meaning of their experiences of social support, both as provider and recipient of support.

Findings from all three studies point to the importance of matching social support to the needs and goals of the employees and training participants, as well as the relevance of how people perceive their experiences of being supported in determining whether they actually benefit from
the support. Presenting social purpose enterprises as vehicles for mobilizing social support through alternative work arrangements draws attention to the number of vulnerabilities faced by people most socially and economically excluded, of which employment is but one area requiring attention. This research contributes to a growing body of literature that demonstrates the holistic way these organizations can address issues of long-term employment exclusion as well as individual and community wellbeing more broadly.
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Introduction

This manuscript-based thesis contains three studies that explore the relevance of social support to the wellbeing of employees and training participants of social purpose enterprises in Canada. Each employing different research methods, the studies examine social support realization from both the perspectives of those in management positions who often take on responsibility for being support providers, as well as the participants who are supported through their job training and employment integration and beyond. All three studies are connected by the overarching research question: What influences contribute to more effective social support realization for participants in social purpose enterprises?

Social purpose enterprises

In Canada, social purpose enterprises are primarily founded and housed by nonprofit organizations. These enterprises sell goods and services on the open market, sometimes with social procurement arrangements. While they undertake commercial activities, they do so in service to their social mission, which is (at least in part) to facilitate employment and job training, including self-employment training, for individuals who face significant and often multiple challenges to finding and maintaining employment.

In these organizations, which are consistently described as “supportive” (Akingbola, 2015; Cooney, 2013; Ferguson, 2012; Shahmash, 2010; Tan, 2009), participants acquire practical skills and experience in a workplace setting, find opportunities to network with employers in the
broader labour market, and connect with appropriate social services directly or through referrals to other agencies (Cooney, 2011). Similar firms in Europe, often referred to as work integration social enterprises, are characterized as being able to “shock-absorb” the potentially challenging process of employment for disadvantaged workers:

[They] are ‘elastic’ organizations that welcome and motivate; they have rules that are not excessively strict and which can withstand prolonged or frequent absences; they modify the job environment to suit the personal needs of the workers; they are, therefore, not only workplaces – they also become places of relationship and rehabilitation as well as organizations contributing to the creation of jobs. (Borzaga & Loss, 2006, p. 172)

The supportive nature of these work integration experiences is a departure from the ‘work-first’ welfare-to-work intervention that prevailed under welfare reform of the 1990s. In Canada as in other parts of the world, attempts to address social assistance spending and long-term unemployment during that period consisted largely of a mix of short-term, low-cost measures aimed at facilitating rapid labour force attachment for individuals unless recognized under a disability support program. The emphasis of these interventions (e.g., workshops on résumé writing, interview skills, and job search) focused less on human capital development and more on facilitating the quickest path to work for participants, on the notion that any job is better than no job as the transition into better employment would be easier from the position of already being employed (Lightman, Mitchell, & Herd, 2007, 2010). If the intention was to reduce caseloads as quickly as possible for cost-saving reasons, then evaluation studies suggest work-first programs fall far short of this goal, as a pattern of returns to social assistance after initial exit of the program, termed cycling, is well documented in Canada, the US and UK (Lightman, Mitchell, & Herd, 2007, 2010).
Lightman et al. (2010) outlined from previous studies the concerns found to be associated with returns to social assistance, and these include poor physical and mental health, addiction challenges, domestic violence, lower level of education and limited work experience, young children and children with health problems, and lack of transportation. Where there are multiple barriers, the likelihood of unemployment is higher as well as the association with return to social assistance (Danziger et al., 2000; Lightman et al., 2010).

From academic research to government sponsored reports, criticisms of the work-first approach have been enduring (Lankin & Sheikh, 2012; Lightman et al., 2010; Matthews, 2004). The post work-first era has seen a slow introduction of additional supports, including pre-employment training and skills training programs, as well as clear acknowledgement that supports need to be flexible and attentive to individual situations, going further than just connecting people to employment but also connecting them to other support services, and if necessary, continuing beyond employment entry as part of a person’s journey towards improved financial stability and overall wellbeing.

The importance of support to meaningful work engagement has long been established; it is the foundation of the supported employment model for people with disabilities. There are variations in approaches to supported employment, where the process of support can begin with first helping participants to identify employment goals, proceeding into the job search and through to the start of work and beyond. The emphasis is often on quick attachment to employment as opposed to any extended counselling/training period outside of the work environment. The ideal is often jobs that are open and competitive in integrated settings. Supports can include job coaches and occupational therapists who assist in securing positions, negotiate with employers to ensure job fit, and provide supervision and continued training on the job, both of which can be
intensive. Employment support can become coordinated with the person’s healthcare support team (Becker & Drake, 2004). In some cases the support recedes over time as participants become increasingly independent on the job, in others support may be a permanent feature of the participants’ employment (Canadian Association for Supported Employment, n.d.; Community Living Research Project, 2006; Keel, Mesibov, & Woods, 1997).

Some social purpose enterprises that employ workers with disabilities operate using a hybrid organizational model where only a percentage of the jobs are reserved for mission-intended employees. In such integrated workplaces, the duties and requirements of the reserved jobs are no different than the other jobs open to all job seekers. The intended employees often introduce their own support to the workplace (e.g., job coach) while co-workers and supervisors provide the ‘natural’ supports that are realized through typical collegial workplace relationships. There are other forms of social purpose enterprises (social firms, alternative businesses, affirmative businesses) where employment may be largely exclusive to workers with developmental or psychiatric disabilities. Affirmative businesses are often initiated and operated by consumers/survivors of the mental health system, with support from community businesses, health services, and other stakeholders (Krupa, Lagarde, & Carmichael, 2003). Although such ventures do not necessarily provide training and employment opportunities in integrated settings, they do adhere to many of the tenets of the supported employment model (Jackson, Kelland, Cosco, McNeil, & Reddon, 2009). Consistent with Cooney’s (2011) assessment of the work integration social enterprise field in the US, social purpose enterprises in Canada have also broadened their participant base in recent years, engaging workers who experience diverse challenges to employment that include but are not limited to disability-related barriers.
Social support and work

While social purpose enterprises are described as supportive, and the supported employment model has guiding principles on work integration supports and their approaches, the supportive aspects of social purpose enterprises have largely been unexplored with social support theory.

In theoretical terms, social support can be considered “the access to and use of individuals, groups, or organizations in dealing with life’s vicissitudes” (Pearlin et al., 1981, p. 339). It can be interpreted as both a resource within the social environment, as well as the process by which social relationships affect health and wellbeing (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). There are three general ways social support is theorized to benefit. Social support may have a general positive effect on our health and wellbeing because it serves to satisfy our basic human need for social connection, understanding, and approval, and to sustain important personal resources such as self-esteem, optimism, and self-belief. When we encounter stressful situations in our lives, social support from others can either directly reduce or eliminate the stressors, or where it is not possible to change the level of stressor, social support may be able to attenuate or buffer the negative impact of the stressor on us (House, 1981).

The extensive field of research on social support in the workplace spans a wide range of occupations and settings and largely concerns work stress and wellbeing. A number of studies examine the effects of social support during employment entry, either in the ways it directly affects job outcomes such as job satisfaction, turnover, and performance, or as a buffer to lessen the effects of anticipated stressors (e.g., unmet expectations, work overload, and workplace conflict) on work outcomes and personal wellbeing (Fischer 1985; Nelson & Quick, 1991). Research has also examined the effects of social support through work mentorships on employees’ work-family conflict and other indicators of wellbeing (e.g., job satisfaction, self-
esteem, self-efficacy) (Dutta et al. 2011; Nielson, Carlson, & Lankau, 2001). As part of the return-to-work process, the relevance of workplace social support has been explored for workers transitioning back to work after a period of absence because of injury or disability (Lysaght & Larmour-Trode, 2008), with research challenging the traditional view of workplace accommodations as being simply changes to the structure of job roles and the physical work environment, to an increasing emphasis on the social processes including social support that facilitates realization of accommodations (Gates, 2000).

While research broadly has found positive associations between workplace social support and various work outcomes and measures of wellbeing for workers, the findings are often not as simple or clear cut as the predominant theories present. In the context of work outcomes, effects of social support can vary by the source of the support, with supervisors often found to be especially effective support providers who can facilitate positive outcomes (House, 1981). But results sometimes run counter to established theoretical propositions. For example, social support may be found to have no direct benefit on physical and mental health at all outside of stressful situations, but serves only as a buffer against stressors at work (House, 1981), contradicting sociological traditions that attribute positive social interactions with psychological wellbeing (Thoits, 1982). In other cases, only direct effects of social support on wellbeing were reported where expected buffering effects were not (Fisher, 1985).

Adding to the complexity, theoretical and empirical work on social support also suggests that misdirected support can potentially lead to unanticipated outcomes for support recipients such as feelings of inefficacy and heightened distress (Bolger & Amarel, 2007; Deelstra et al., 2003). Given the intricacies in social support realization, this thesis will build on existing knowledge of the work process accommodations and other supports that are central to the employment and job
training experiences within social purpose enterprises, by incorporating and testing theories of social support to better understand the influences that would contribute to more effective social support mobilization for participants in these organizations.

Three studies

There are several potential advantages to pursuing a manuscript-based thesis over a more traditional format thesis. For a manuscript-based thesis, despite all three papers sharing an overarching research focus (e.g., social support realization in social purpose enterprises), the process of undertaking three discrete studies effectively divides and expands the research process into three phases. Because each phase builds on the previous one(s), the transition between phases offers an opportunity to pause, reflect, and adjust the course of research, if learnings from the previous phase demand it. The inherent flexibility of the manuscript-based format was particularly appealing as this project began as an exploratory one. Adoption of this format can expand the overall scope of the research, as the scope is allowed to change with each study, exploring the research problem from different levels (e.g., organizational and individual) and different perspectives (e.g., support providers’ and support recipients’). Segmenting the research also allows for the use of different research methods that, unless contained within the separate studies, may be too divergent to be incorporated cohesively into a single study. Those were some of the main considerations that led to my decision to complete a manuscript-based thesis.

In this thesis, the three studies are as follows:

The first paper, *Social support for improved work integration: Perspectives from Canadian social purpose enterprises*, presents a mixed-methods study examining social support within
social purpose enterprises from the perspective of those in management and executive positions. It involves 67 survey respondents and 11 interviews participants. The paper explores the types and availability of social support within these organizations, as well as the relevance of the supports to the participants’ work and personal outcomes, through the perception of those who are often in the role of support organizer or direct support provider. This paper was published in the Social Enterprise Journal, 11(1), doi: 10.1108/SEJ-07-2014-0033.

The second paper, Personal wellbeing of participants of social purpose enterprises: The influence of social support, presents a quantitative study that examines the effects of workplace social support on changes in personal and vocational wellbeing of 78 employees and training participants over the course of their time at their social purpose enterprises. This study examines whether the way participants perceived their social support influenced changes in four areas of their wellbeing: self-esteem, optimism, self-efficacy, and vocational identity. The paper has been published online in Voluntas, International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations (2015), doi: 10.1007/s11266-015-9637-4

The final paper, Worker experiences of social support in social purpose enterprises, is a small qualitative study that explored the way employees and training participants interpreted and understood their experiences with social support at their social purpose enterprises, using an Interpretative Phenomenological Approach. This paper has not yet been submitted for publication.

The three papers had been prepared with the intention that each could be read as a stand-alone research paper. As such, readers engaging with the thesis as one singular piece of work, from introduction to conclusion, will have to contend with some repetition within each paper, as each
study restates the broader research problem and presents a similar theoretical framework in setting up its particular research questions. Another quirk of this thesis is the variation in styles between the papers. As two of the three papers were published in different journals prior to completion of the thesis, they were formatted according to the requirements of their respective journals. Unavoidable repetition and the stylistic anomalies aside, the thesis concludes with a final chapter that weaves together the learnings from all three studies, with suggestions for public policy, organizational programs, and future research.

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Social Services. Retrieved from


Study 1
Social support for improved work integration: Perspectives from Canadian social purpose enterprises

Abstract

Purpose: To explore the ways in which social supports can promote enduring attachments to work and improve overall wellbeing of disadvantaged workers, within the context of social purpose enterprises.

Design: With coordinators, managers, and directors as informants, this mixed-methods study employs a survey and interviews to establish the availability and importance of different social supports found in social purpose enterprises across Canada, and to explore the reasons for such support mobilization and the influences that determine whether social supports are sought or accepted.

Findings: Findings substantiate the prevalence and importance of work-centred social supports. Social supports can promote more sustainable attachment to work by addressing work process challenges, ameliorating workplace conflict, attending to non-vocational work barriers, and building workers’ self-confidence and self-belief. The source of a support as well as the relationship between support providers and recipients all contribute to whether supports will be beneficial to recipients.
Research limitations/implications: Future studies require corroboration directly from the employees and training participants of social purpose enterprises. The limitations on the sampling and the survey response rate may limit generalizability of findings.

Practical and social implications: Findings contribute to knowledge on more effective social support provision for improved work outcomes and overall wellbeing of employees and training participants.

Originality and value: Applying theory from social support research brings greater clarity to the potential of work-centred supports for addressing both vocational and nonvocational barriers to employment and job training for disadvantaged workers.

Introduction

Around the world, social purpose enterprises (known also as social purpose businesses, social enterprises, social firms, affirmative businesses, work integration social enterprises [WISEs]) have risen in recent years in numbers and in profile (Defourny and Nyssens, 2008) to create employment and job training opportunities for individuals deemed “most at-risk of permanent exclusion from the labour market” (Spear and Bidet, 2005, p. 197). Operating in many sectors (e.g., food services, construction, bicycle repair, and courier), they sell their goods and services to consumers, and they share the social mission of creating supportive work environments that “shock-absorb” the potentially challenging process of employment (re-)entry for disadvantaged workers (Borzaga and Loss, 2006; Cooney, 2013). In Canada, social purpose enterprises have been predominately initiated by non-profit social service agencies, where workers have the
chance to develop technical and soft skills through on-the-job training in a real-life work environment, connect with employers in the broader employment market, and access social services directly or through referrals to other agencies. While some offer transitional employment, others provide permanent opportunities as well as micro-entrepreneurship training and assistance for persons who may have greater difficulty transitioning into the broader labour market.

‘Supportive’ is a ubiquitous descriptor used throughout literature on social purpose enterprises as a place of work and training (Akingbola, forthcoming; Cooney, 2013; Ferguson, 2012; Shahmash, 2010; Tan, 2009). But what makes a supportive work or training environment? Some studies document the workplace accommodations found within social purpose enterprises (Akingbola, forthcoming; Krupa et al., 2003) noting the workplace flexibility required to accommodate the social, educational, and economic needs of participants (O’Shaughnessy, 2008); others highlight the relational supports that develop between colleagues (camaraderie and support networks) as well as with workers and members of their broader community (e.g., customers) (Ho and Chan, 2010). However, across the multidisciplinary field of research on social purpose enterprises, there has yet to be any systematic, theory-grounded investigation into the full range of supports, their pervasiveness across organizations, and their role vis-à-vis the challenges and outcomes of work integration for persons with a history of exclusion from the ‘mainstream’ labour market. This mixed-methods study begins to address this gap. With current attention from sectoral advocates highlighting the unique supports of select social purpose enterprises and upholding supports themselves as best-practices in work integration (Enterprising Non-Profits, 2014), a theoretical exploration is timely, as the tautological assumption that all
supports are supportive, without an awareness of where supports can fail, can undermine the effectiveness of support intervention.

This study focuses on the social context in which supports are made available to be taken up and therefore recasts supports as social supports. In doing so, this research builds on the wealth of theoretical and empirical research on social support as a foundation on which to initiate further theory specific to the ways work-centred social supports can potentially lower barriers to employment and improve the health and wellbeing of workers and training participants of social purpose enterprises. For this study, coordinators, managers, and directors of social purpose enterprises, primary social support providers themselves in many cases, have served as informants on the types and availability of social supports, as well as their relevance to the work and personal outcomes of employees and training participants in these organizations.

Context: Employment exclusion and the role of social support

Labour force exclusion can result from many different disadvantages: for example, limited formal education, work skills and experience, different disabilities, poor health, addiction challenges, insecure housing, citizenship status, lack of transportation, a language barrier, unaffordable childcare, and systemic discrimination (Danziger et al., 2000; Lightman et al., 2010). For those in the most precarious circumstances, these barriers are rarely singularly experienced, with research showing that the number of disadvantages faced is strongly and inversely related to a person’s employment status (Danziger et al., 2000). As a response to exclusion, social purpose enterprises have been initiated to create direct employment and job training opportunities. Even among the wider social enterprise sector – comprising not only of enterprises with employment and job training as their main focus but also those with broader
social or environmental missions, recent surveys in 2011 and 2012 found that between 19 and 31 percent of these social enterprises across select Canadian provinces provided employment, training, and/or services to people with employment barriers. Provincial comparisons also indicate that, on average, these more-generalized social enterprises employed between 16 (Ontario) and 132 (Alberta) individuals of designated social groups which, although consisted of community members at large, also included low-income individuals, women, youth, and individuals living with disabilities and/or other employment barriers in the year of the survey (Elson and Hall, 2013).

But more specifically to Ontario, Canada, the importance of social purpose enterprises to employment integration has been emphasized in Ontario social assistance program reviews undertaken in the last decade (Lankin and Sheikh, 2012; Matthews, 2004). One reason that social purpose enterprises are highlighted is that they are perceived as having supportive environments to “be useful models for all social assistance recipients, …particularly important for people who are socially excluded and have little or no work experience” (Lankin and Shiekh, 2012, p. 43).

Even though there is general confidence in social supports as being important to employment participation for those experiencing high barriers to employment, the concept warrants further investigation and some theoretical anchoring because existing research has demonstrated that social supports can result in outcomes opposite to those anticipated. Not only can misdirected or otherwise ineffective social support attempts be considered unhelpful by recipients (Lehman and Hemphill, 1990), they may in some circumstances bring no beneficial effects, or worse, they can be a detriment to the recipients, resulting in feelings of indebtedness and dependence, threat to self-esteem and self-efficacy, and heightened experience of distress and emotional reactivity
(Bolger and Amarel, 2007, Deelstra, 2003). Only by bringing a theoretical understanding to work-based social supports can organizations and employment programs effectively and reliably promote enduring attachment to work and training where other interventions have failed.

**Social support: Functions, process, and effects**

Social support is the assistance realized specifically through interpersonal relationships (Turner, 1983). Social support has a direct “main effect” on wellbeing; evidence shows that social integration and network embeddedness is beneficial to a person’s health and affect, even where a person is not exposed to challenges or threats (Cohen and Wills, 1985).

But extensive research interests centres on the way social support can assist in the presence of event-based stressors or chronic life-strain (Turner and Turner, 2013). One way social support can assist is to directly diminish the stressor, attenuating its negative impact, or it can prevent harm altogether by eliminating the stressor from the start. Another way is for social support to “buffer” the adverse effects of stressors on a person’s physical and mental health. According to the buffering hypothesis, social support dampens the positive association between stressors (e.g., work-difficulties) and stress outcomes (e.g., anxiety, depression, job satisfaction), by assisting coping efforts that can minimize emotional upset and negative behavioural responses, and by bolstering other personal resources such as self-esteem, personal control, self-efficacy and optimism.

Like social support, personal resources are also stress-buffers or moderators. But while personal resources can protect from stress, they are also subject to depletion from stress exposure (e.g., high self-esteem that can help to protect a person from job loss may wear under prolonged
unemployment) (Aneshensel et al., 2013). Because low self-esteem, self-efficacy, and personal control are associated with increased symptomology on depression (Maciejewski et al., 2000; Pearlin et al., 1981; Rosenberg et al., 1989), preventing diminishment of personal resources is thought to be an important pathway by which social support can sustain wellbeing in challenging circumstances.

By function, social support can be characterized as instrumental, emotional, or informational assistance from others within a social network (House, 1987). Forms of instrumental support include money, material and service assistance; emotional support can convey feelings of love, sympathy, understanding, acceptance, and esteem; and information or guidance support can help reappraise a stressful situation to be less threatening. Although the three functions are conceptually distinct, in practice they are seldom independent (Cohen and Wills, 1985), as any one support may give multiple meanings to recipients: “Instrumental aid has socioemotional overtones, of course; practical help from others assures the individual that he or she is cared about” (Thoits, 1982, pp. 147-148). As a multidimensional construct, the amount of support and the source of its provision are also important aspects, beside its function, that contribute to the effectiveness of the support to the person on the receiving end (Thoits, 1982).

Social support can be operationalized in several ways: support perceived to be available but not necessarily accessed; support actually provided and received through interpersonal exchanges; and (invisible) support that is received but not perceived by the recipient. Although outcomes on health and diminished stress effects have been linked primarily with perceived support, a review on recent findings over the last decade on received social support generally showed positive or mixed outcomes (Nurullah, 2012). In this study, social supports are operationalized as those
provided by support providers, or the exchanges of which are witnessed from a third party perspective; however, these supports may or may not be perceived by social support recipients.

**Social support and work**

There is a vast body of research exploring social support in the workplace in relation to employees’ health and wellbeing. For example, stressors related to new work entry (e.g., work expectations, role overload) can be associated with turnover and intentions to quit; while coworker and supervisor support improves newcomer adjustment (Fisher, 1985). Supervisor support can buffer the negative effects of work overload on psychological wellbeing and job satisfaction of workers (Terry *et al.*, 1993). Career mentoring and tasks support can predict workers’ job satisfaction (Harris *et al.*, 2007); and supportive mentors can reduce employees’ work-family conflict (Nielson *et al.*, 2001).

Studies have underscored the social process of all workplace accommodations to acknowledge the “relationship components in every accommodation” (Gate, 2000, p. 93). Furthermore, social support has been identified as an important factor to successful work re-entry for workers returning from disability leave (Lysaght and Larmour-Trode, 2008). However, there has been limited research on the importance of social support for workers where significant challenges to work are not health and disability related.

With respect to social purpose enterprises, as noted, social support is assumed, but has not been addressed within a theoretical framework. The findings of research on social support in other contexts might be generalized to social purpose enterprises – for example, some instrumental social supports noted in the literature on social purpose enterprises such as flexible work...
scheduling, transportation subsidy, and meal programs, could conceivably improve capacity of participants in social purpose enterprises to meet work obligations by alleviating the specific strains or generally improving a personal’s overall health and wellbeing. Furthermore, emotional or guidance supports are also important resources that can bolster a person’s self-esteem, self-efficacy and sense of personal control (Cohen and Wills, 1985; Pearlin et al., 1981; Wenzel, 1993) – qualities that can help people persist in their effort to overcome difficulties that may arise during employment transitions into or from a social purpose enterprise or other challenges that can threaten to derail work progress. Although accommodations such as flexible work rules or transport subsidies are typically considered structural or institutional assistance, these supports are indeed socially organized (i.e., rules matter only upon enforcement by someone; institutionally-issued material supports are still controlled by persons acting as gatekeepers). As such, the social organization of support has the potential to determine whether the supports will be accessed and the extent to which they can be helpful when received.

The extent to which social supports are available across all social purpose enterprises is still unclear. Therefore, this study begins with a survey of persons in management or directorship positions of social purpose enterprises across different parts of Canada¹ for an overview of the types of social supports that are available to workers and training participants of these organizations. The study then proceeds onto a deeper exploration into the influences and aims of the social support, and how the social supports have contributed to the work outcomes and overall wellbeing of employees and training participants of their enterprises. The majority of social purpose enterprises under investigation have employment and job training, including micro-entrepreneurship, as their primary social mission; however, multi-purpose social
enterprises with a specific aim of employment or work integration as one of their social objectives have also been included.

This study is guided by the following questions:

(1) What types of social supports are available through work and job training at a social purpose enterprise?
(2) How are social supports mobilized to engage disadvantaged workers in employment and job training?
(3) What influences the likelihood that participants in a social purpose enterprise will access the available supports?

Methods

A mixed-methods design was employed to accommodate both the confirmatory and exploratory nature of this study. The study begins with the collection of quantitative data to confirm the types and level of social supports available in social purpose enterprises, but overall the study is largely driven by the qualitative inquiry into the perceptions and experiences of those who are presumed to be either direct support providers or witnesses to the dynamics of support provisions.

First, a survey with 67 social purpose enterprises was conducted beginning February 2013 across different regions in Canada, to verify the extent to which different types of social supports are available in social purpose enterprises. The survey questionnaire was completed online by coordinators, managers and directors of social purpose enterprises, who reported on their organization and the characteristics of the intended employees and training participants.
Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of 11 managers and directors of social purpose enterprises, 8 of whom also participated in the survey. The interviews were conducted by phone and later transcribed for analysis. The transcripts of the interview recording were reviewed and confirmed by all participants prior to data analysis.

Survey design, sampling, and data analysis
The questionnaire was piloted with three social purpose enterprise practitioners in Toronto. Invitations to the survey were sent to organizations by email. The survey frame was developed and cross-referenced using a compilation of sources that include: survey frames of other social enterprise sector scans (Elson and Hall, 2011; 2012; O’Connor et al., 2012), listings from funders of social purpose enterprises (e.g., Toronto Enterprise Funds [TEF]², Social Enterprise Canada³), and previous academic research and discussion papers on Canadian social purpose enterprises (Jackson et al., 2009; Krupa et al., 2003; Lysaght, and Krupa, 2011; Warner and Mandiberg, 2006). Best efforts were made to include every active social purpose enterprise in operation. A screening question at the start of the survey questionnaire was used to reconfirm that the organizations fit the only inclusion criterion: that respondents represented a social purpose enterprise that is actively employing or job training workers with a history of difficulty finding or retaining employment. There were 85 attempts on the survey. In total, 67 participants responded to at least half of the social support items before the last section of the questionnaire on employment barriers; as such, they were included in the sample (for a response rate of 26 percent). Data were analyzed using SPSS.
Interview sampling and analysis
The social purpose enterprise selection was based on organizational variety in commercial activities, locality, and whether the organizations were focused on employment or training, or both. Using NVivo software and through an iterative process, the transcripts were coded through both deductive means guided by theory on social supports as well as inductive means for original emergent patterns and concepts. The codes were clustered into themes and categorized under the guide of the research questions. Interview respondents from Ontario represented the majority of participants (6), with others representing social purpose enterprises from Alberta (2), British Columbia, Manitoba, and Atlantic Canada.

Limitations
Limitations to the research methodology include the voluntary sampling and the small sample size of the survey, making generalizability across the entire Canadian social purpose enterprise sector difficult. Moreover, this study examines social supports strictly from the perspective of one type of support providers, those in supervisory roles. The implications of these limitations against the findings are further addressed in the discussion section.

Results
Organizational profiles
Survey participants from Ontario (51 percent) and British Columbia (25 percent) make up the large majority of all survey respondents. From the survey, 76 percent of social purpose enterprises are non-profits; of those 63 percent operate with charitable status. In total, 85 percent
of the social purpose enterprises (for and non-profits) in the sample are affiliated with a non-profit social service organization.

Ninety-four percent of the social purpose enterprises surveyed provide paid work, 70 percent offer job training, and 46 percent unpaid job experience. The median year of establishment for the social purpose enterprises was 2002, with the longest running enterprise established in 1969, and the newest in 2012.

Profile of the survey respondents
Eighty-two percent of survey respondents had direct interactions on a day-to-day basis with the intended workers and training participants. Of all respondents 35 percent had previously held supervisory or management position in a for-profit business from a similar industry as their social purpose enterprise. Excluding those with sector-specific management experience, 24 percent had been managers/supervisors in for-profit businesses in other sectors. As such, 60 percent of all survey respondents have management experience in non-social purpose enterprises with which to compare their current experience.

Profile of workers and training participants
Coded data from the open-ended question indicate that the majority (65 percent) of respondents represented social purpose enterprises working with a specific demographic focus; for example, “We hire street-involved youth with limited job skills … (who are) mainly Aboriginal, First-nations and Métis youth.” The remaining 35 percent had a mixed profile of workers and training participants.
The employment barriers faced by workers and training participants are just as complex and multidimensional. From a list of 27 employment barriers, respondents were asked to indicate the proportion of their intended workforce that faced each of those barriers at the time of hire or training commencement. Respondents were asked to select between 0%, 1-25%, 26-50%, 51-75%, and 76-100% of their workforce.

The data indicate diversity within organizations. With the exception of financial hardship, which was experienced by the large majority of workers (76-100%) in 78 percent (N =64) of the respondents’ organizations, for all other work barriers examined at most just over half of all responding organizations had the large majority of their workers facing any one particular employment barrier. This diversity in responses also pertained to barriers related to skills, education, and work experience -- the primary rationale for traditional employment integration programs. These data suggest the challenges to sustained work engagement are more complex than skills training and work experience acquirements. For employment challenges related to health or disabilities, the groups with the largest number of responding social purpose enterprises had 25 percent or less of their workers experiencing any one of those challenges.

*Job tenure and employment trajectory*

Employment positions in social purpose enterprises can be long-term and permanent, termed contract positions, or work placements. Some organizations retain a limited number of their training graduates for employment in termed or permanent positions. In some cases, all variations of the above exist within a given organization.
Some social purpose enterprises operate with a hybrid workforce where only a percentage of jobs are reserved for the intended workers who are the focus of their social mission (50-70% were examples given). Many operate with parameters that are flexible to the particular circumstances of the individual participants, meaning that the procedures can be amended to best serve the individuals (e.g., one social purpose enterprise that is primarily a training ground has retained some of its workers when it became obvious that the organization may be the most appropriate place of employment for them).

The following section presents the types of social supports that can be found broadly within social purpose enterprises, the support providers’ perception of the relevance of the supports they give to the wellbeing and employment outcomes of workers and training participants, and factors that affect support seeking and acceptance. Findings related to the first research question draw mainly from the survey, while the second and third research questions are explored primarily through interview data.

(1) Types of social supports

From the survey, respondents were asked which social support functions were available to workers from within their social purpose enterprises and to rate their level of importance relating to the workers' overall ability to maintain their position at the enterprise. The data presentation is divided into instrumental (e.g., financial, material, or service support) and emotional (e.g., encouragement, guidance, and understanding from peers and supervisors).

Instrumental social supports are subdivided into service support related to job tasks or skills development and material or subsidy support. Supports with the greatest availability include
those that are directly job-tasks related (additional supervisory support; additional training; and flexibility in job tasks and responsibilities). Material supports (e.g., transportation subsidy, certification subsidy, and childcare subsidy) are less available on the whole (Figure 1.). Even in cases where material supports were available, they were considered to be less important for sustaining work engagement than the tasks-related supports. Only 50% of respondents indicated childcare subsidy was somewhat or very important to work engagement where available, whereas for another social support such as additional supervisory support, 100% of the respondents indicated the support was somewhat or very important where available. For childcare subsidy, the low rating of importance may relate to a smaller percentage of workers having children, or other reasons indiscernible from the data alone.

![Figure 1. Instrumental supports: Availability and importance to work and job training engagement.](image-url)
For emotional and guidance social supports, there was general consensus among respondents on their broad availability as well as their level of importance to worker outcomes. As shown in Figure 2, supervisors who can be confided in for work related matters and are empathetic to workers’ lived experience were noted as either somewhat or very important.

![Figure 2. Emotional and guidance supports: Availability and importance to work and job training engagement.](image)

From the interview data, the instrumental, emotional, and information/guidance social supports noted as available were consistent with the ones on the survey. Other material social supports not covered on the survey but noted throughout different interviews include an emergency loan-fund for workers, meals/food program, stipend (for training), training (e.g., driver’s education), technology supports (computer or fax) for job search, and clothing support. Other service supports include training such as financial literacy workshops or life-coach sessions organized on-site, and coordination with workers’ external support network.
Availability of social supports by different demographics within social purpose enterprises

Social firms or affirmative businesses that largely employ individuals living with psychiatric, developmental and other disabilities are recognized for considerable workplace supports and accommodations (Krupa et al., 2003; Warner and Mandibert, 2006). In order to determine whether organizations working with a higher percentage of workers living with disabilities or health impairments would have greater availability of social supports, analyses of variances (ANOVA) were conducted on the number of social supports (by type) for organizations with different percentages of workers (i.e., 0%, 1-25%, 26-50%, 51-75%, and 76-100%) facing employment barriers related to health or disabilities. There were no significant ANOVA results, suggesting that organizations with higher (or any given) percentage of workers living with psychiatric, intellectual and physical disabilities, and poor health do not on average make available any more instrumental or emotional/guidance supports compared to other social purpose enterprises. Although this finding should be interpreted with caution given the limitation of the small, voluntary sample, it does substantiate the research position to investigate all social purpose enterprises together, on the premise that social supports (work process accommodations or otherwise) on average are no more prevalent in organizations working primarily with individuals living with disabilities than other enterprises.

(2) Mobilization of social supports

From the interview, themes on social supports mobilization emerged around alleviating stressors that were work and non-work related, developing personal resources, and transitioning to other employment.
Alleviating job overload

From the interviews, examples given of work process modifications that ease the workers’ ability to meet job demands include reduced work hours, amendable work load, flexible schedule, extra time to acquire new technical skills or assume workplace norms, and job coaching (in supported employment model), for example:

I think what a lot of our clients need is a lot of flexibility in terms of hours, and being able to create the kind of working conditions that meet their needs or their capacity even. (Participant 3)

As instrumental supports, accommodations around job tasks, pace of work, and length of work day can prevent job strain by limiting the chances of work overload. In some instances, the social support can be brought in with the worker (e.g. a job coach or a support worker), facilitated independently by a social service agency. This type of instrumental social support was emphasized most heavily in discussions with managers and directors of social purpose enterprises that work with persons with impairments related to health and disabilities. Where someone cannot work a full day because of the effects of their psychiatric medication, or fatigues easily because of health or impairment challenges, work process modification can be arranged at the start if issues are known, or adjustments can be made along the way as needed.

Minimizing interpersonal conflict

Modified work demands and processes can also serve to circumvent stressful situations that may ordinarily arise in addressing unmet job obligations with management. As such, many of the instrumental supports that lower demands in the first place are potential relievers of plausible tension or worker-management conflict. Examples were given where instrumental, emotional,
and guidance supports are extended in combination, where the flexibility around the rules, as well as additional coaching support and reassurance all serve to prevent disengagement:

So there’s an extra safety net, I guess. And a lot of the things that wouldn’t fly, when they get caught we use that as a learning opportunity, for the youth to understand and change their behaviour so that they can succeed in the future. In a lot of other programs, the youth would just – they would be asked to leave or they would stop attending, I think. Because we are socially based, there is that extra encouragement and support for them to stay involved. (Participant 11)

In cases where respondents brought up discrimination and stigma experienced by some of their workers and training participants, there was noted emphasis on fostering a safe work environment that nurtures and promotes understanding and inclusion.

For a small number of workers, their inability to navigate interpersonal relationships with co-workers may be one of the biggest barriers to employment because of issues such as anger management difficulties or mental health challenges. In these cases, managers have taken additional steps to transform normative work relationships to encourage continued work engagement for all involved. In one extraordinary case, a respondent detailed a situation where she instituted a mutual agreement between two people, one who was upset with the other because she experiences paranoia, to cease all interaction with each other in order to have both persons continue on in the workplace:

Some things are real, and some things are perceived. And so it’s a matter of trying to work with both… In most places of employment, you wouldn’t see that as being a positive way of dealing with something. Whereas in this situation, I have different people that would come up with that agreement and it’s seen as being a way of working. (Participant 4)
These accommodations, socially engendered, contribute to employment outcomes “because then they can keep coming.” This example is creative and unique even among cases where interview participants noted extensive work relations adjustments within their social purpose enterprises.

Relieving chronic strain

In the interviews, punctuality and poor attendance were commonly noted as being more frequent problems than expected in typical workplaces. While many saw the problem as a skill-based concern (e.g., time management skills) that required additional coaching (a support addressing job demand), others noted family obligations or family discord, such as having to deal with family members “in jail or their kids (who) are in trouble,” as well as unstable childcare to be underlying causes for absenteeism:

If they have family issues or situations that come up, businesses like us would be more flexible and more understanding versus in a regular business, if something happens they’ll give you one or two chances; after that, that’s it. It’s like, ‘Go deal with your own issues. I need to find someone who can actually get the work done.’ (Participant 10)

Respondents noted corrective measures taken often involve providing instrumental supports such as additional coaching and referrals to services (e.g., childcare, counselling, directly engaging with problem solving), social supports that attempt to address the root cause of barriers (stressors) to work or job training for sustainable improvements to wellbeing.

Other chronic stressors or non-vocational work barriers noted by respondents to affect work outcomes include poor health, housing insecurity, food insufficiency, and financial difficulties. As one manager noted: “Sometimes it’s as simple as they don’t have the transportation funds, or
tokens, to even come to work, which goes back to their income or instability barriers.”
(Participant 2)

Different instrumental supports have the potential to directly alleviate a number of chronic strains. From the survey and in interviews, the more typical include subsidies for training, transport, and referrals to needed services. Others are more unique, including an emergency loan fund:

Most of the requirements (of the loan pool) are fairly modest…so ‘I’ve run out of money and I can’t feed my family’ … those sorts of things. It provides gap funding for 2-3 weeks, depending. And we just keep cycling that through the company based on the request of the employees. (Participant 1)

Reducing anxiety, building confidence and self-efficacy
A number of respondents are aware that adjustment to job-entry can be stressful, “Sometimes, just placing someone right into mainstream, it can be very overwhelming.”

Unique strategies were shared on alleviating the adjustment demands on workers and training participants, again mixing instrumental, emotional, and guidance supports. One respondent noted the importance of establishing a sense of belonging through community engagement:

…(T)he comfort level we try to build when people are beginning with us and just coming in, is to let them know through hearing our stories and seeing the different people that come to volunteer who are members of the community not in the program (just community members), that everybody is dealing with something. (Participant 6)
Many respondents noted that with certain workers and training participants, self-confidence and self-efficacy building are time-consuming processes but nonetheless crucial first steps in establishing a foundation to work entry. In some cases, the lack of confidence may be the result of past and present life difficulties that have been shown to affect functioning in the workplace; in such instances, continued coaching, re-appraisal support, and reassurance from others are vital to perseverance:

We have someone currently with us…She’s a refugee. She’s been here for less than 2 years and she’s still struggling and bringing the rest of her family here. She has the skills and everything but because of everything she’s gone through, she lacks – she lost a lot of confidence in herself and her ability to do things…she’ll lose focus. So it’s just a matter of continuously telling her, ‘No, you can do this. You can keep going. You have the skills.’ (Participant 10)

In another example, a participant who began work “exhibiting a lot of anxiety, and needed an incredible amount of support as far as ongoing verbal support and reassurance,” was able to flourish and build confidence over a number of months, leading to a part-time employment opportunity, which she completed successfully before returning to the social purpose enterprise. This, according to the interview respondent (Participant 4), would not have been possible “if she hadn’t built her confidence and sense of self through attending the program.”

Transitioning to other employment

A number of social purpose enterprises that provide transitional employment or job training offer instrumental supports including resume development, interview coaching, making contacts with local businesses and other networking opportunities, to facilitate the transition into more permanent employment. The supports are often provided through the affiliated social service
agencies or partnerships with other community-based organizations, although some are directly provided within the social purpose enterprise. These supports for workers and training participants often continue even after departure with the social purpose enterprises. As one respondent noted:

We also can work with employers (of our former training participants) to get feedback and find out where the youth need extra support and provide that follow up support as well, to make sure that they’re not just employed but that they stay employed. (Participant 11)

(3) Accessing social supports

Source of social support

For workers and training participants, access to social support can be found from multiple sources within social purpose enterprises. Not surprisingly, respondents noted those in management or supervisory roles as main sources of social support. Some relationships through which supports could be realized are formally instituted (e.g., counsellors, social workers, job coaches), while others like peer support may either be developed naturally or more formally through mentorship programs. Being able to identify with the source of the support was referred to as reason for accessing it:

We have a peer-to-peer…She’s not trained or whatever. But, she is trained because she used to be an at-risk street youth. She used to live the street; She’s been there, done that. She can relate (to the other youths). So if it’s something that she can relate to, and she can offer guidance on how she got out, then she’s going to go for it. (Participant 7)
One respondent described the intended benefits of role-modelling for new training participants for inspiration and practical guidance, to pair up with “veterans” who have transitioned successfully from training to permanent paid positions in the social purpose enterprise, “…to look up to for some of the participants that are here, to see what the potential is…” (Participant 2).

However, it has come to the attention of some participants that social support extended by different sources may be received differently, leading to differential outcomes. For one respondent who works with individuals living with developmental disabilities, it is the “natural supports,” as opposed to the formally instituted supports, that may be “more effective and uplifting” and bring greater benefits:

> The individuals that we support, so many people in their lives are paid to be there. So when it can be someone that’s not considered a support worker, not considered a service provider, but just someone out there in the community who they’re working alongside with and is developing an interest and willingness to support them, I think that has a lot more impact. (Participant 9)

Moreover, cultural considerations may also affect uptake of supports for workers and training participants:

> There are some cultural elements that say, ‘I will not ask for help from...’ a social worker is an example. And that depends on which community you’re working with. So even if we can provide it, it may not or it will not be used. (Participant 1)

In the above example, a social worker had been recruited at one time to assist workers with non-vocational issues that the organization identified as having a negative effect on work progress.
The resource was rejected by the workers and ultimately removed; the issues, however, remained and had to be addressed through other means.

**Trust**

“Trust,” “rapport,” “connection,” by whichever expression used by the interview participants, it is perceived as perhaps one of the most important factors in determining whether supports will be sought and accepted. On the question of why trust is important, one respondent exclaimed, “Because they’ll be willing to listen to you.” The advice and the coaching that is extended by supervisors require a willingness on the part of the employees and training participants to receive them as enabling, not controlling or demanding.

**Stability**

From the interview respondents, the level and fluctuations of social support exchanges largely depend on the level of stability in the lives of employees or training participants, whether the supports are work-performance centred or personal or health issues related. In cases where respondents perceive the work barriers of their employees and training participants to be largely work-process related, there was greater emphasis on the social supports provided as more strictly oriented towards work process accommodations, downplaying other social supports (e.g., building self-esteem and confidence, referrals to social services).

If they’re our clients (from the parent nonprofit organization) then they’re coming with either housing support or other kinds of living support so that is something that’s taken care of for them… The majority of our employees are pretty stable. (Participant 3)
Interview respondents generally agree that stability in life is paramount to employment and job training outcomes. However, stability can change quickly and unpredictably. Housing situations and episodes of mental and overall health deterioration were named as recurring stressors that affect work and job training. The path towards stability may not be linear: this applies to both progress within social purpose enterprises as well as to transitions to ‘mainstream’ employment.

A number of respondents noted instances of employees’ and job training participants’ exits and re-entries:

(For this one person)...because drugs became a bigger issue, we suspended the member for a while. Then we brought him back again. So we try to...we’re firm but flexible. We try to be fair. (Participant 5)

They may not necessarily finish, or they may leave after sometime being with us because they’ve worked as far as they wanted to work in their lives right now, and they just cannot handle anymore, so they just quit. But we never know what impact the exposure has had, so we just keep inviting them to always become part of what we’re doing, or return or visit or what have you. We try not to close the door on too many people. (Participant 6)

Sometimes workers transition into other employment, but maintain attachment to the social purpose enterprises to continue to access socials supports:

Again, a normal boss is not going to (provide) that social support, and that’s been a struggle in the past, where the youth does get another job and come back to us for the social side of it. (Participant 7)

To be clear, many of the workers and training participants engage with ease at their social purpose enterprises; others complete their time and go on to find gainful, stable employment
elsewhere. All interview respondents acknowledged or shared examples of these stories. The emphasis here is that for those who do require more time and greater amount of social supports along their work trajectory, social purpose enterprises can be places of invaluable resources.

Discussion
Both survey and interview findings generally confirm the prevalence of social supports in social purpose enterprises, regardless of the demographics of the workers or training participants. From the survey, emotional supports were noted as most available, followed by instrumental service supports related to additional coaching, oversight or referrals to needed services; comparatively, the least available were subsidy-based supports for employees and training participants. The financial cost to such subsidies may explain their lesser availability. In a report on select social purpose enterprises in British Columbia, by rough estimates an additional 33 percent above basic operating costs is required to facilitate all variety of social supports for their workers (Shahmash, 2010). Compared to financial subsidies, emotional and instrumental service supports may be more easily facilitated for the possibility of absorbing some of the costs under the personnel budget for existing staff. The costs to social support provision is a significant financial obligation for social purpose enterprises, one that contributes to continued external funding dependency in many cases, but is steadfastly undertaken because these provisions ensure that all workers desiring to work can do so in safe, meaningful ways.

The broad availability of social supports, both instrumental and emotional, across social purpose enterprises does not necessarily mean equal uptake of supports. From the interviews, coordinators/managers and directors were in consensus that social supports are differentially
accessed. In many cases, respondents estimated that about a quarter of their workers and training participants require substantial supports and are on the receiving end of the majority of the social supports exchanged. Given consistent research findings that perceived social support is associated with better physical and mental health outcomes (Cohen and Wills, 1985; Uchino, 2009), the perception of having supportive supervisors and coworkers may also benefit workers who are not receiving support directly but can perceive the availability of support in their immediate environment.

From the interviews, it is clear that social supports are mobilized around actual or potential stressors for workers. The intensions behind the work process modifications were noted as either to circumvent the occurrence of different role strains such as role overload (e.g., over-demand by the quantity or complexity of work), inter-personal conflicts within role sets, and inter-role conflict (e.g., work-family conflict), or to attenuate their impact on the wellbeing of workers, promoting continued engagement with work; the noted importance of work process modification are consistent with existing research.

A unique finding in this study is the level of social supports that are mobilized to address non-vocational stressors, or stressors not role-based in work. These supports are mobilized to address chronic ambient strain (e.g., poor health, financial difficulties, housing insecurity, and food insufficiency) that have been identified to impact on work outcome directly (e.g., some are main causes of poor attendance) or indirectly by affecting a person’s general health and wellbeing.

The role of social support in promoting self-esteem, confidence, and self-efficacy, as noted throughout the interviews, is also consistent with research which points to these personal resources as important psychological mediators in the stress process (Cohen and Wills, 1985). In
the face of difficulties, social support can counteract stressors by preventing injury to self-esteem and sense of personal control, indirectly lessening psychological harm such as depression (Pearlin et al., 1981). “High self-esteem can give individuals the confidence necessary to attempt problem-solving or to persist in their efforts. And the perception that social support is available helps to sustain a person’s self-worth and sense of mattering to others, again encouraging coping efforts” (Thoits, 2013, p. 358). Similarly, perceived self-efficacy, the belief in one’s ability to deliver certain actions (Bandura, 1997), can be just as influential on work performance and has been found to improve within a work integration social enterprise setting (Denny et al., 2011). In situations where stressors cannot be removed (e.g., challenging aspects of work that cannot be modified by instrumental supports/accommodations and must be met head on), social support such as encouragement and positive feedback may be particularly important to continued positive engagement at work through bolstering personal resources.

Although social support is most often conceived of as coping assistance (Thoits, 1986), instrumental supports in social purpose enterprises may also have a leveraging function. From the survey, 80 percent of respondents indicated networking opportunities with other employers in the industry were available to their employees and training participants; the availability of networking and other job-seeking supports were noted as well in interviews. Here, social support can be interpreted as assistance that extends the social capital of participants. Noted for its importance in work integration, particularly for disadvantaged workers (Bidet, 2009), social capital, often characterized by proxies such as social and community engagement has been identified as an important outcome for participants in social purpose enterprises, as part of their work trajectory and overall wellbeing (Barraket, 2014; Ho and Chan, 2010; Quarter et al., forthcoming). While employment in social purpose enterprises has been shown to facilitate
social and human capital gains, financial improvements are often more modest, as many employees work only part-time, often at lower wages with continued support from social assistance programs (Quarter et al., forthcoming). Where appropriate, transitioning to external employment may be the most likely solution to greater financial wellbeing for employees and training participants. Research on social support in lower income networks has shown limited bridging capacity, with some effects on reducing likelihood of household poverty but no improvement on job quality or increased earnings (Henly et al., 2005). Although the intended outcome of networking and employment-seeking social support is to bridge employment with firms in the broader employment market, questions arise on whether the expectation of such transitions for workers facing more complex challenges is unrealistic and unfair, and ultimately negate the benefits they experience from the “ethic of care” and social participation that prevail within the social economy (Amin, 2009, p. 46). Further research with employees and training participants is required to determine if economic mobility is realized from such bridging supports, and for whom.

On the influences of effective social support exchange, role characteristics of the support provider were perceived as particularly salient to the acceptance of supports. The effectiveness of peers as a source of support, as noted by some coordinators/managers/directors, aligns with the theoretical proposition that “sociocultural and experiential similarities” are important in fostering an “empathic understanding” that would encourage someone to seek or accept support (Thoits, 1986, p. 420). Supervisory support was also noted to be influential on work outcomes of employees and training participants, in both the survey and interview findings. Although the study respondents themselves being in management positions may introduce a social response bias on questions of supervisory support provision and importance, the central role of supervisors
contributing to worker wellbeing through support provision has been well documented in other studies; These include studies with a general workplace focus (Baruch-Feldman et al., 2002; Nelson and Quick, 1991; Terry et al., 1993) and others that concern specifically the process of work (re-)entry or sustainable employment for workers living with disabilities (Gates, 2001; Lysaght and Lamour-Trode, 2008). Consistent with research on social enterprises more broadly, which identifies human resource management as a key competency of effective managers and highlights the unique challenges stemming from the heterogeneity of workers of such organizations (Moreau and Mertens, 2013), the provision or facilitation of social supports can be considered subsumed under the responsibilities of management staff in ensuring a healthy work atmosphere and fostering the wellbeing of all personnel.

Interestingly, support provided by someone whose explicit professional capacity is to counsel or provide assistance (e.g., job coach or social worker) was noted in the data as being potentially less beneficial or outright rejected by recipients. Rejection of professionalized social support can be interpreted through an empowerment-oriented, anti-oppressive approach to social work that highlights the inherent power dynamic within expert-client relationships (Hedin et al., 2005). Tension rises between reliance on another person to advocate and support versus self-driven advancements and decision-making more oriented towards solidarity and self-help.

Empowerment as a framework has been used to investigate work integration in social co-operatives in Sweden with workers transitioning from the correctional system (Hedin et al., 2005). However, research on social support offers another view of unaccepted or inefficacious support, again relating back to the importance of personal resources. In an experiment (Bolger and Amarel, 2007), visible support that was unsolicited was found to be ineffective or worse, heightened emotional distress where the support communicated inefficacy to the recipients who
were university students. Although job coaches play an integral role in the work integration of
workers living with disabilities, development of natural supports with peers, which can include a
buddy system where workers are paired (Wald, 2011), may be a less discernable support
intervention and have been noted as a useful strategy in literature on workplace accommodations.
In the interview example where the introduction of the social worker was rejected, not only was
the support unsolicited but it was deemed culturally inappropriate. Influences from cultural
beliefs such as “stigma, loss of face, or not reaching out to strangers” have been shown to
prevent support seeking for services like counselling until the point of acute crisis (Wong, 1998,
p. 221). For workers and training participants of certain cultural backgrounds, different strategies
may be required in terms of outreach or approaches to social support provision in order for all
individuals to benefit equitably from supports within organizations.

But more important than the role characteristics of the support provider are the nature of the
relationship and the level of trust. Trust was emphasized throughout the interviews as an
important determinate on whether support will be accepted. Noted as a mediator of effective
support exchanges (Lysaught and Lamour-Trode, 2008), trust requires time and intention to
foster, and its development should be central to any strategy for social support provision.

In the past it has been noted that, “Family circumstances, health issues, housing and child care
concerns sometimes need to be addressed before people can turn their energy towards getting to
work” (Matthews, 2004, p. 20). For a number of social purpose enterprises, that level of stability
is not always required before “getting to work.” A person may be able to benefit from
employment and training (supplementary income, social connections, improved affect, and other
health outcomes) while they work towards stabilizing their lives in other ways, often with the social supports that could be accessed within the social purpose enterprise.

The results of this study have shed light on the way high incidence of social support provision can facilitate work integration in a substantive number of diverse social purpose enterprises, despite the methodological limitations on the generalizability of results. Although data was gathered only from the perspective of social support providers and not recipients, interview respondents were able to identify a number of social support sources, the work barriers (i.e., potential stressors or actual distress) they are meant to address, and instances of ineffective supports exchanges. However, the persons best able to inform on effectiveness of social supports are those on the receiving end. Future studies must look at social supports from the perspective of employees and training participants of social purpose enterprises.

**Implications and conclusion**

Findings from this study substantiate the prevalence and importance of work-centred social support for the work engagements and overall wellbeing of workers and training participants. It expands on the research which has pointed to the importance of social support in the return-to-work process and the relevance of the supported employment model for persons living with disabilities, to include workers facing a broader range of employment challenges. The qualitative findings profile how social supports have been mobilized to addressed non-vocational stressors to promote more sustainable attachment to work. These findings suggest that the source of the support, as well as the relationship between support provider and recipient have an influence on whether supports can have a positive impact on the recipient.
This paper complements the existing research studies on social purpose enterprises that have framed participant outcomes in terms of gains on human capital, social capital, self-efficacy, and empowerment, by presenting new avenues of research to examine the processes towards those gains. Considering the most recent advocacy interests in Canada on supportive employment within social purpose enterprises (Enterprising Non-Profits, 2014), this applied theory of social support draws explicit attention to the relational processes that comprise the interventions to remove barriers to work, build personal resources, and reinforce work engagement. By bringing greater understanding to these processes, the intent is to increase the likelihood of success in social support interventions. On a practical level, an estimation of the costs associated with this demonstration of social support calls into question any generalized expectations of financial self-sufficiency, as compared to traditional businesses, where social purpose enterprises are concerned.

A further consideration, one which has been raised in research on the adaptation of individuals living with disabilities (King et al., 2006), is the level of optimal support provision for different workers in social purpose enterprises. The ideal level of support should facilitate effective engagement at work without removing mastery opportunities that are important to personal development of workers and training participants. Mastery experiences are central to the development of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Social support can stifle development of effective problem-solving and other essential coping skills when it removes challenges that could readily be overcome with perseverance and ingenuity. The balance is in providing social supports without taking away occasions for workers to cultivate self-efficacy and resilience. The arena for future research on social support within social purpose enterprises is fertile with possibilities.
Notes

1 This study includes social purpose enterprises operating in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, and Atlantic Canada.
2 http://www.torontoenterprisefund.ca/what-we-do/who-we-fund
4 The 27 employment barriers assessed through the survey belonged to 9 categories: Employment experience; Education, skills, and training; Material and financial concerns; Access to services; Health and abilities; Social network; Life history; Self-concept; and Anxiety and fear
References


Study 2
Personal wellbeing of participants of social purpose enterprises: The influence of social support

Abstract
This paper examines the effects of practical and emotional social support to changes in personal and vocational wellbeing of employees and training participants of social purpose enterprises. This study finds that among participants with lower baseline optimism and self-esteem, those who found the practical social support from their organization to be more relevant to their work outcomes had significantly higher optimism and self-esteem at the time of the survey, compared to other low baseline participants who had assigned less importance to their work-centred practical support. Social support did not influence those with high baseline scores in optimism and self-esteem, or changes to self-efficacy and vocational identity. Implications on support intervention within social purpose enterprises and for the broader field of social enterprise research are discussed.

Introduction
Social purpose enterprises, like ordinary commercial entities, generate income through exchanges of goods and services, but they operate with the added social objective of providing work opportunities to people who have experienced persistent difficulties finding or maintaining employment. These enterprises are often noted for their ‘supportive’ nature that accommodates the social and economic situations as well as the employment history and skill level of their workers. They provide employment and job training to individuals with complex and often
multiple challenges to work, which include but are not limited to poor health, physical, psychiatric and developmental disabilities, insecure housing, limited formal education or work experience, language barrier, newcomer adjustment challenges, unaffordable childcare, and domestic violence. Enterprises of this nature are sometimes referred to as social firms (Lysaght et al. 2012), affirmative businesses (Krupa et al. 2003), hybrid organizations (Cooney 2006), work integration social enterprises (Kuosmanen 2012), and social co-ops (Thomas 2004). The work opportunities can be part-time or full-time, short-term or permanent. In Canada, these ventures are primarily not-for-profit and belong to any number of industries (e.g., food services, construction, courier services, bicycle repair, printing, recycling), including some that also provide micro-entrepreneurship training and support. Although they generate revenue through sales on the market or service contracts with the state, in most cases these organizations remain heavily reliant on other government funding, foundation grants, and volunteer support. They are often supported by a parent nonprofit organization (Quarter et al. 2015).

Social purpose enterprises are part of a larger group of social enterprises, entrepreneurial nonprofits, whose growing presence worldwide is reflected in their prevalence within contemporary nonprofit sector research. Studies have explored the rationale of their surge, conceptualized their place within the social economy, theorized the features of an ‘ideal-type’, and examined their distinct managerial challenges and relevant policy instruments for their advancement (Defourny et al. 2014; Quarter et al. 2009; Trembley 2010). Although the findings of this particular study are briefly considered for their implications at the institutional and policy levels, social purpose enterprises in this paper serve primarily as the location of a phenomenon at the individual or interpersonal level: that is the changes to the personal wellbeing of employees
and training participant of social purpose enterprises in relations to the social supports they experience within their organizations.

The premise of this study hinges on two considerations: One is the recognition that social purpose enterprises are workplaces suffused with social supports to enhance work integration and attachment for disadvantaged workers, an assertion that has received some substantiation in the literature (Chan 2015; Enterprising Non-Profit 2014; Hedin et al. 2005). The other, currently only a proposition, is that the social purpose enterprise model may be particularly beneficial to individuals who are most socially excluded and least experienced or qualified (Lankin and Shiek 2012). The intersection of the two considerations presents social support as a tenable, central feature of social purpose enterprises that makes these organizations better models for individuals who are especially vulnerable or in greater precarity.

Research examining employment initiatives in traditional classroom setting and work integration social enterprise setting have found that those with lower self-efficacy, life satisfaction, employment expectations and depression experience greater gains in those areas as a result of positive intervention, compared to participants with higher baseline measures (Creed et al. 2001; Creed et al. 1998; Denny et al. 2011). Differential outcomes between low and high baseline individuals have also been found in studies with employment interventions explicitly designed within a supportive framework, with training processes and coping social support that were intended on “raising self-esteem, job search self-efficacy, and inoculation against setback” for unemployed job seekers (Vinokur and Prince 1995, p. 56; Prince et al. 1992).

By integrating research findings that have separately revealed differential outcomes for those with lower baseline wellbeing through (1) employment initiatives broadly as well as (2) a
supportive style of coaching, this paper builds on a synthesized theory that not only can employment training and integration programs result in greater gains for those with lower measures on wellbeing to start, the supportiveness of the training and overall workplace relationships, as perceived by the recipients, further differentiates the outcomes among the group with low baseline wellbeing. This paper investigates whether participants with lower initial measures of wellbeing who also have experienced greater volume or more relevant work-centred social support at their social purpose enterprises, made the greatest advancement on self-esteem, optimism, self-efficacy and vocational identity (4 measures of overall and vocational wellbeing) compared to other study participants. Using a survey method, data were gathered from employees and job training participants of social purpose enterprises across different areas of Ontario, Canada.

*Social support in social purpose enterprises*

Social support is the “flow of emotional concern, instrumental aid, information and/or appraisal (information relevant to self-evaluation) between people” (House 1981, p. 26). Emotional support conveys love, acceptance, and belonging. Instrumental assistance can include financial, material, or service support. Informational or appraisal support is the provision of advice or guidance that assist in problem-solving or reinterpreting a stressor in a way that lessens the impact on a person (Thoits 2011).

By positioning employment barriers as stressors on a person, the potential benefits (and limitations) of work-centred social supports can then be understood in terms of their ability to directly diminish the stressors or attenuate their negative effects on the employees and training participants. Instrumental supports often found in social purpose enterprises include flexibility
in scheduling, workload, and pace of work, additional coaching and training support (Borzaga and Loss 2006; Krupa et al. 2003; Shahmash 2010). They modify work processes and are implemented with the intention to reduce barriers for workers with health, disability, or other challenges that would make it difficult for them to meet work obligations without accommodations; these social supports limit the potential for work strain or other work-related stress outcomes (e.g., job dissatisfaction, absenteeism, management-worker conflict, and intentions to quit) (Chan 2015). Other instrumental supports also noted in social purpose enterprises do not directly address work-centred challenges but rather the non-vocational barriers that can indirectly affect work outcomes (housing and food insecurity, family difficulties, lack of transportation, addiction challenges) (Chan 2015; Enterprising Non-Profit 2014); they include referrals to social services, and in some cases, material or financial support (e.g., meal program and transportation subsidy).

In situations where the stressor cannot be removed or even objectively minimized (e.g., where a work challenge must be met head-on), emotional or informational/appraisal social support can help someone manage the stress response to the challenge. A social support provider can help a person reinterpret a situation so that it appears subjectively less harmful, or by bolstering the person’s self-concept (e.g., personal resources such as self-esteem, optimism, and self-belief – which are of central interests to this paper) that may otherwise diminish under persistent stressor or strain that are work or non-work related. Emotional and appraisal social supports that can bolster personal resources, such as consistent encouragement and positive reinforcements from management staff as well as peers, job coaches, counsellors or social workers, have been emphasized heavily as important aspects of the overall experience at a social purpose enterprise (Chan 2015). But even without the presence of stressors, social support is believed to have a
direct “main” effect on a person’s psychological and emotional wellbeing; positive social relations convey reassurance of worth to uphold self-esteem and social identity, and help provide “a set of stable, socially rewarded roles in the community” (Cohen and Wills 1985, p. 311; Thoits 1982). As such, the instrumental, emotional, and informational/appraisal supports that collectively enable workers to sustain engagement in training and employment benefits them psychologically and emotionally, in part, by way of the workers’ own positive self-reflection through occupying socially valourized roles such as that of being a ‘productive worker’.

*Optimal matching of support and needs*

Since the 1990s, Cutrona and colleagues have pursued theoretical and empirical research to connect different types of social support with particular stressors they might be most effective at alleviating, based on the idea that social supports are most beneficial when they match the coping needs and goals of the support recipient (Cutrona 1990; Cutrona et al. 1992; Cutrona et al. 2007), and that contextual factors will influence the extent to which assistance offered will actually be perceived as helpful by the recipients (Cutrona et al. 1990).

Cutrona and Suhr (1992) hypothesized that problem-focused support (instrumental and informational support aid) would be most appropriate in instances where stressors were controllable, and where stressors were not controllable nurturant support (emotional and network support) may be considered more helpful. Lab experiments in part supported these hypotheses: when the support provider exhibited control or expertise over the stressor, informational support was associated with higher satisfaction by the support recipient. However, against the hypothesis, support recipients with higher control over their own stressors found increasing advice from their partner unwelcome, as indicated by lower satisfaction with such interactions.
Controllability of stressor had no effect over the positive association between emotional support and recipient satisfaction.

The possibility that emotional support has wider applicability is consistent with findings in another study (Cutrona et al. 1990), where emotional support was judged helpful (through external assessment) for both emotional and instrumental needs, but instrumental support was judged significantly less helpful than emotional support where the recipient gestured for emotional support. The importance of matching emotional needs with emotional support was demonstrated in yet a separate study (Cutrona et al. 2007), where the signal for emotional support met instead by advice support resulted in participants rating their partners as being as less sensitive.

Cumulatively, findings from the studies on the matching support model suggest that the supportiveness of the same objective assistance may be perceived differently depending on a number of factors, specifically the needs of the social support seeker as well as other contextual factors including the controllability of the stressor and the spontaneity and source of the social supports offered. One thing of note is that with the aforementioned studies, all of the outcomes examined related only to participants’ evaluation on the assistance examined. Although it is expected that assistance evaluated as supportive would be associated with other positive outcomes, it is possible that supports judged as unhelpful may still result in positive gains (e.g., better health or work outcomes). This study will attempt to address more explicitly the relationship between the perception of social support and improved outcomes in personal wellbeing.
Social support, optimism, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and vocational identity

Optimism is the generalized expectation of positive or negative outcomes (Carver et al. 2005); self-efficacy is the belief in one’s own ability to carry out a task successfully (Bandura 1982); and self-esteem is the self-assessment of personal value or self-worth (Thoits 2013). High optimism, self-esteem, and self-efficacy are consistently associated with health and psychological benefits as well as a number of other positive outcomes. Lower anxiety, depression, and work burn-out, as well as better affect and adjustment, and higher life and job satisfaction have all been directly associated with higher levels of optimism in various studies (Carmel 1997; Chang and Sanna 2001; Grote et al. 2007; Jex and Bliese 1999; Rosenberg et al. 1989; Solberg and Villarreal 1997).

Aside from their association with positive psychological and emotional outcomes, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and optimism may also facilitate positive behavioural outcomes; all three have been theorized as centrally influential on personal resilience, as those with greater self-esteem, self-efficacy, and optimism are believed to be more motivated to pursue goals, recover more easily from set-backs, and persist in their effort even in the face of obstacles (Bandura 1997; Carver et al. 2005; Thoits 2013). Specific to vocational wellbeing and also associated with resilience is the concept of career identity. Career identity has been theorized as an essential dimension of a person’s employability, a “compass” by which a person orients towards career opportunities (Fugate et al. 2004). In a number of studies, vocational identity has been associated negatively with social avoidance and distress, anxiety and depression (through career transition), and positively with self-esteem and job satisfaction (for review see Holland et al. 1993).

Although not typically investigated as an aspect of overall wellbeing, the theoretical relevance of vocational identity, particularly for individuals who have experienced employment difficulties,
accounted for its inclusion as one of the outcomes examined in this study. Vocational identity is expected to be weaker for individuals who have had limited to no work experience, or for others who have had to abandon old careers in search of new ones (e.g., a person returning to work from long-term disability; newcomers to Canada).

Although joblessness is associated with a number of negative outcomes, (re-)integration into work does not guarantee a rebound or improvement in psychosocial wellbeing. Low self-esteem, sense of failure, and doubt over personal abilities may continue even after (re-)employment (Fineman 1983; Kaufman 1982). A panel study of unemployed people found that financial hardship, marital dissolution (the significance of which the researchers interpreted as social support loss), and psychological distress after initial job loss were all better predictors of psychological distress at follow-up, above unemployment status at follow-up (Halvorsen 1998). For individuals most socially and economically excluded, persistent financial difficulties as well as other poverty related challenges may be a reality as they work towards a long and sometimes non-linear trajectory of increasing financial and overall stability. Even in social purpose enterprises earnings are comparatively low (Quarter et al. 2015), but the availability of material and financial support beyond the wages, as well as referrals to needed social services, can indirectly reduce financial strain and directly reduce vulnerability. Given the positive association between social support and optimism (Friedman et al. 1998; Karademas 2006), self-esteem (Sherkat and Reed 1992) and self-efficacy, with some evidence that socially supportive interventions can boost any and all three of these personal resources (Dutta et al., 2011; Lee et al. 2006; Steese et al. 2006; Vinokur et al. 1995), the added layer of social supports that seems to be a particular feature of the social purpose enterprise experience may contribute to greater
improvements in workers’ wellbeing compared to more traditional job training and job placement in the broader labour market.

But despite the seeming availability of social support in social purpose enterprises, there is no assurance that supports are accessed or accepted in a way that is necessarily helpful to workers. Social support that is offered can fail to be of any real assistance or it can be rejected altogether. Even within social purpose enterprises, social supports appears to be differentially accessed by employees and training participants for a number of reasons: some workers with greater overall stability in their lives may not require as much social support, or available supports may be rejected by a person for various reasons (e.g., lack of trust, cultural inappropriateness) (Chan 2015). Differential benefits from social supports, particularly among those in positions of greater vulnerability, may contribute to differential outcomes for workers and training participants.

*Differential gains from training intervention*

Although influenced by Brockner’s theory (1988), which posits that people with lower self-esteem are more malleable to external influences and social cues than those with higher self-esteem, researchers examining the potential of differential outcomes from employment training have expanded their interest beyond low-self-esteem to other personal vulnerabilities. Studies have found that participants with lower self-efficacy, life satisfaction, and higher symptomology on depression find significant improvements in those same areas in association with training compared to participants with relatively high baseline measures—who do not (Creed et al. 2001; Creed et al. 1998; Denny et al. 2011).

Studies exploring differential outcomes have also examined specialized interventions that combined traditional job search training with integrated social supports, where trainers were
explicitly instructed to be empathetic and encouraging, validate participants’ feelings and concerns, foster supportive behaviour among the participants themselves, and facilitate problem-focused coping support designed to mentally prepare participants for the challenges in dealing with their job loss and job search. Similar to the other studies, the intervention primarily benefited individuals at high-risk for depression in terms of level of depression at follow-ups (Prince et al. 1992). In a second trial, those at high-risk in the intervention group were also more likely to be re-employed at follow-up compared to other high-risks individuals in the control group; there was no difference in likelihood of re-employment between low-risks individuals in the treatment and control group (Vinokur and Prince, 1995).

Although these last two studies incorporated employment interventions with explicitly supportive elements integrated, their findings do not necessarily suggest that the social supportiveness of the intervention was the moderator on the gains experienced by those at higher-risk. The control groups in these studies were mailed self-instructional literature on job-search; as such, the comparisons were not between supportive training and non-supportive training, but rather supportive training and no in-person training at all.

In this study, all participants are employed or job training in a social purpose enterprises. Although different types of social supports have been documented as broadly available in these organizations, there are objective differences between organizations. Even within the same organization, participants may subjectively perceive the same availability of the social supports differently; alternatively, some workers may perceive social support as being very important (i.e., helpful) to their own employment or job training outcomes, where others may not. Following Cutrona et al.’s optimal support matching model, supports evaluated by the participants to be more important to their work will be interpreted as indication that the supports
correspond to their own perceived goals or needs. Supports that are judged more helpful are expected to result in better personal outcomes for support recipients. The purpose here is not to link which type of supports are most useful in which circumstances; rather, the participants are asked to judge for themselves the importance of the supports to their overall work outcomes, whatever their needs or goals. The expected variability in the perceived importance of social supports will allow this study to determine the role of social support in moderating the gains on wellbeing of employees and job training participants, above the effect of the social purpose enterprise experience. Therefore, it is hypothesized that individuals with lower self-esteem, self-efficacy, optimism, and vocational identity, who also perceived their workplace social support to be more available and relevant to their work outcomes, will find the greatest gains on the same four areas of wellbeing.

Method

Data were collected as part of a larger survey with workers and training participants of social purpose enterprises in parts of Ontario, Canada. As the questions on self-esteem, self-efficacy, optimism, and vocational identity were on the second half of the survey, and participants were given the choice whether to continue onto the second part after part one, there was attrition from 130 participants who completed part I to 78 participants in 19 organizations who agreed to continue to part II. Participants were provided with a $15 gift card to a coffee shop. Participant descriptions are found under Table 1.
Table 1

Demographic Profile of Survey Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable (N)</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Variable (N)</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender (78)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Country of birth (76)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Outside of Canada</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (78)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Marital status (75)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 and under</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 – 29</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Separated, divorced, widowed</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 – 39</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Married or common law</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40 – 49</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Position (77)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 – 59</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Trainee/apprentice</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 +</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest level of schooling (78)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Length of time at SPE (70)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school diploma or less</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>6 months or less</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college or University/college diploma</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>7 to 36 months</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate or graduate university degree</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Over 36 months</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Measures
Self-esteem was measured using the Rosenberg (1965) scale. Optimism was measured using the Revised Life Orientation Test (LOT-R) by Scheier, Carver, and Bridges (1994). Self-efficacy was measured using a modified 12-item scale (Bosscher and Smit, 1998) from the original General Self-Efficacy Scale with 17 items developed by Sherer et al. (1982). Career identity was measured with the vocational identity subscale from the My Vocational Situation questionnaire developed by Holland, Daiger, and Power (1980).
With the exception of the vocational identity subscale (which used True [1] False [0] response options), items on all scales were measured using a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from ‘strongly disagree’ (scored as 1) to ‘strongly agree’ (scored as 5). Reversed items were converted for scoring. On the survey, respondents were asked to rate each item at 2 time-points, prior to joining their organizations (T₁), and at the time of the survey (T₂). Table 1 reports on the inter-item reliability for all scales at both time points. Scale scores for each person were produced by taking the mean on the item scores. Only individuals who completed 80% of the items on each scale were given a scale score and included as part of the analyses.

Table 2

Reliability of Outcome Measures at 2 Time Points

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Cronbach’s alpha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self esteem</td>
<td>.847</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optimism</td>
<td>.761</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-efficacy</td>
<td>.901</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Identity</td>
<td>.841</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the survey, respondents were also asked to indicate the availability of different work-based practical supports (7) and emotional supports (7) at their social purpose enterprises, and where available, the importance of those supports to their work outcomes at the organization. As such, the responses provided measures on both the perceived quantity of social support, as determined by the number of supports respondents indicated to be available, and the perceived quality of the support, as rated from ‘not at all important’ (1) to ‘very important’ (4) by the respondents.
The 7 Items related to practical, instrumental work-based supports included: ‘job coach or supervisor who provides continuous guidance on job duties,’ ‘flexibility in work schedule,’ referrals to support services in the community (e.g., counselling childcare, housing)’. The 7 emotional social supports examined included ‘manager/supervisor who offers encouragements and praise on a regular basis,’ ‘manager/supervisor you regard as a friend,’ and ‘manager/supervisor who believes in your ability to succeed at work,’ and ‘mutual trust and friendship with other coworkers who have faced similar barriers to employment.’ Inter-item reliability of the importance measure for practical support (.937) and emotional support (.799) were strong, and the scores were averaged for each person. Accordingly, each participant had 4 social support measures: number of practical social supports; importance of practical social support; number of emotional social supports; and importance of emotional social supports.

Table 3

**Scores on Personal Wellbeing and Social Support at Time 1 and Time 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables (N)</th>
<th>Prior (T₁)</th>
<th>Time of survey (T₂)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self Esteem (65)</td>
<td>3.31 (.85)</td>
<td>3.80 (.76)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optimism (68)</td>
<td>3.05 (.84)</td>
<td>3.36 (.73)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Efficacy (65)</td>
<td>3.27 (.85)</td>
<td>3.67 (.67)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational Identity (72)</td>
<td>.51 (.26)</td>
<td>.65 (.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical social support _ importance (75)</td>
<td>3.44 (.58)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical social support _ count (75)</td>
<td>5.56 (1.68)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional social support _ importance (75)</td>
<td>3.58 (.45)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional social support _ count (75)</td>
<td>6.53 (.83)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

T₁ and T₂ scores on all outcome variables were examined to determine if there are differences by demographic categories. The prior scores did not differ significantly between genders or levels of
education. However, those who were employed immediately prior to joining their organizations did have significantly higher scores on self-esteem ($M = 3.81, SD = .66$), self-efficacy ($M = 3.71, SD = .45$), and optimism ($M = 3.52, SD = .48$), compared to their respective counterparts ($M = 3.04, SD = .84, F(1, 62)=13.59, p<.001$), ($M = 3.06, SD=.92, F(1,61) = 9.17, p =.004$), ($M = 2.79, SD = .92, F(1,62)=11.92, p = .001$).

Whether the participants were employed or job training did not make a difference on the current measures of outcome. However, those who were at their social purpose enterprise the longest (over 36 months) had significantly stronger vocational identity ($M = .78, SD = .16$) compared to those who had been at their organization 6 months or less ($M = .60, SD = .25$); those who had been there between 7 and 36 months ($M = .72, SD = .25$) did not differ significantly from the other 2 groups.

One of the recognized limitations of this study is the collection of data at two time points at one time, making it in essence a cross-sectional study. The memory of participants was relied upon to provide an accurate assessment of wellbeing at an earlier time, which introduces the possibility of measurement error. However, given time and resource constraints, data collection proceeded in the manner described.

**Procedure**

Three-way factorial analyses of variance were conducted to determine if there were differential changes to personal resources from time 1 to time 2, based on participants’ baseline measures as well as the characteristics of the available social support at their social purpose enterprises. Each personal resource (i.e., self-esteem, self-efficacy, optimism, and vocational identity) for each social support was examined in separate analyses. Each overall 2 x 2 x 2 analysis on a given
personal resource measure consisted of one within-subject factor (time at T₁ and T₂) and two between-subject factors: high vs. low prior measure, and high vs low perceived importance of social support. High/low groups for the prior measures were dichotomized based on median cuts to the raw prior scores. Two separate measures on the importance of (1) practical social support and (2) emotional support were similarly dichotomized using a median split. As a result of the limited variability in the quantity of perceived emotional social support (88 percent of respondents indicated they experienced at least 6 of the 7 emotional social supports examined), only the quantity of practical supports were examined as a factor. Because the distribution of scores were left-skewed, the groups were dichotomized not using a median split but between those with 5 or less out of 7 practical supports examined (37.5% of cases) and those with greater than 5 practical supports (62.5% of cases).

Where significant three-way interactions were found, separate 2 x 2 (Time x Support) ANOVA tests were conducted at each level (low/high) of prior scores, following the hypothesis that support affects the change in personal resources over time differently for those with low initial scores than those with high initial scores on the outcome variable. Where significant Time x Support interactions were found, simple main-effect tests were conducted using paired-samples and independent t-tests. Where there are no 3-way interactions, analyses proceeded to explore any significant 2-way interactions [(Time x Prior scores) or (Time x Support)]. Where no significant 2-way interactions were found, the significant main effects were to be explored.
Results

Significant three-way interactions were found only with two of the personal resources variables: self-esteem and optimism. With self-esteem as the dependent variable, there was a significant 3-way interaction (Time x Practical support importance x baseline self-esteem), $F(1,61) = 6.33, p = .015, \eta_{p}^2 = .09$. Upon further analyses, the 3-way interaction was due to the significant 2-way interaction with Time x Practical support importance for those with low self-esteem prior to joining their organization, $F(1,29) = 5.07, p = .032, \eta_{p}^2 = .15$, but not for those with high self-esteem to start. However, there was still a significant main effect of time for those with high baseline self-esteem, $F(1,32) = 17.83, p < .001, \eta_{p}^2 = .36$. As such, those with high self-esteem to start, as one group, on average still had a statistically significant improvement on self-esteem from $T_1$ to $T_2$. For those with low baseline self-esteem, paired-samples t-tests indicated significant improvements on self-esteem from $T_1$ to $T_2$, not only for those who perceived the practical social support available to be of higher importance to their work outcomes, $t(13) = -3.90, p = .002, d = 1.04$, but also for those who assigned less importance to the practical support, $t(16) = -2.82, p = .012, d = .68$. However, for the low prior self-esteem group, self-esteem at time 2 is higher for those who assigned greater importance to the work-based practical social support available to them. Independent samples t-tests on the $T_2$ self-esteem for the group with low baseline found that those who perceived the practical supports to be more important to their work outcomes had on average higher self-esteem ($M = 3.67, SD = .69$) than those who attributed less importance to the practical supports ($M = 3.04, SD = .69$), $t(29) = -2.63, p = .013, d = .95$.

Figure 1 illustrates the means comparisons between all groups.
Examining emotional support importance as the support factor with self-esteem, there was again a significant 3-way interaction, $F(1,61) = 5.14, p = .027, \eta^2_p = .08$. Exploring Time x Support interaction for each level (low/high) of prior self-esteem scores, as expected, the interaction was significant for the group with lower self-esteem to start, $F(1,29) = 4.43, p = .044, \eta^2_p = .13$, but not for the group with high prior self-esteem. Time as a main effect was still significant for those high prior self-esteem, $F(1,32)= 17.85, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .36$. For those with low prior self-esteem, there was again significant gains on self-esteem from $T_1$ to $T_2$, regardless of whether they perceived the emotional support available to them to be more important, $t(12) = -3.48, p = .005, d = .97$, or less important, $t(17) = -3.49, p = .003, d = .82$. Although Figure 2 suggests that among those with low prior self-esteem, the group who also found emotional support to be more important had greater self-esteem at $T_2$, the $T_2$ difference between the two groups was not statistically significant.

*Figure 1.* Changes in mean self-esteem from $T_1$ to $T_2$, by baseline levels and perceived importance of practical social supports.
Examining the effects of practical support and baseline optimism to changes in optimism for participants, there was a significant 3-way interaction effect (Time x Support x Prior Optimism), $F(1,64) = 5.79, p = .019, \eta_p^2 = .08$. Tests for two-way interaction (Time x Support) for the group with low baseline optimism was significant, $F(1,33) = 4.30, p = .046, \eta_p^2 = .12$. For those with high optimism to start, there was not significant two-way interaction, but there was significant main effect for time, $F(1,31) = 4.88, p = .035, \eta_p^2 = .14$. For those with low optimism to start, there were significant improvement on optimism scores for both groups who rated the practical social support as being less important, $t(21) = -3.18, p = .005$, and more important, $t(12) = -2.51, p = .028$. However, as reflected in Figure 3., the group with low baseline optimism and attributed greater importance to the practical support available to them on average had significantly higher T2 optimism scores ($M = 3.28, SD = 0.77$) than those who felt the available practical social support was less important to their work outcomes ($M = 2.71, SD = .59$), $t(33) = -2.46, p = .019$.

*Figure 2.* Changes in mean self-esteem from $T_1$ to $T_2$, by baseline levels and perceived importance of emotional social supports.
Examining the effects of perceived importance of emotional support and baseline optimism level to changes in optimism from before participants joined their organization to time of survey, significant 3-way interaction was again found, $F(1,64) = 6.77$, $p = .011$. As with the other analyses, tests of 2-way interaction (Time x Support) was significant for those with low initial optimism, $F(1,33) = 5.58$, $p = .024$, $\eta^2_p = .15$. For those with high initial optimism, 2-way interaction was not significant, but the main effect of time was, $F(1,31) = 5.38$, $p = .027$, $\eta^2_p = .15$. For those with initially low optimism, they on average also experienced improvements in optimism, whether they perceived the emotional support available to them as less important, $t(23) = -3.48$, $p = .002$, or more important, $t(10) = -2.40$, $p = .037$. However, as indicated in Figure 4., the group who perceived the emotional social support to be of greater importance had the lowest mean optimism scores to start, but at the time of the survey their mean optimism level surpasses the other group, who also had low optimism to start but had rated the emotional
support as less important. For the low initial optimism group, the change in optimism from before joining the social purpose enterprise to the time of the survey was greater in magnitude for those who placed greater importance on the emotional support available to them than the group who perceived the emotional support as less important. However, comparing optimism scores between the high/low groups in perceived emotional support independently at each time point did not yield significant results.

Figure 4. Changes in mean optimism from $T_1$ to $T_2$, by baseline levels and perceived importance of emotional social supports.

For the outcome variables self-efficacy and vocational identity, 3-way ANOVAs produced no significant interactions involving any of the social support factors. Further analyses excluded the social support factors and found significant 2-way interactions (time x baseline level) for both self-efficacy, $F(1,63) = 10.83$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .15$, and vocational identity, $F(1,70) = 21.31$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .23$
Figure 5. Changes in mean self-efficacy from T1 to T2, by baseline measures.

Paired-samples t-tests indicated significant improvement in self-efficacy scores between T1 and T2 for those with low baseline self-efficacy scores, $t(32) = -4.02, p < .001$, as well as those with high baseline scores, $t(31) = -2.27, p = .030$. Examination of Figure 5 suggests that the change is greater in magnitude for those in the low baseline group; t-test on the change scores between low and high baseline groups confirms this, $t(36.05) = 3.34, p = .003$. However, their mean T2 score remains lower compared to the group with higher baseline scores.

For vocational identity, there was only significant improvement between T1 and T2 for those in the low baseline group, $t(35) = -5.95, p < .001$; for those with strong vocational identity prior to joining their organization, there was no significant changes to their vocational identity associated with their time at the supported social enterprises. Lastly, there were no significant main or interaction effects with quantity of practical social support as a factor on any of the personal
resource variables examined. As such, the amount of support available did not appear to influence the outcomes of participants in this study, only the perceived importance of the social support did.

![Figure 6](image)

*Figure 6. Changes in mean vocational identity from T1 to T2, by baseline measures.*

**Discussion**

*Social support moderating gains in personal wellbeing*

The results of this study in part supported the hypothesis that perception of more helpful social support through work relations can lead to better personal outcomes, particularly for those in more vulnerable positions to start. Specifically, the perceived importance of practical work social support moderated the gains in self-esteem and optimism for individuals with low baseline measures. Higher perceived importance of practical work support, which could be interpreted as support that was perceived as more helpful by the participants themselves, resulted in higher
self-esteem and optimism at time 2 for individuals with low self-esteem and optimism at time 1, respectively. Practical work social support did not affect changes to self-esteem and optimism for those with high self-esteem and optimism to start.

Where social supports did not influence changes to personal outcomes

Perceived importance of emotional support did not influence the changes on any of the four areas of wellbeing examined. Although analyses on self-esteem and optimism found a significant time by emotional support importance interaction for the low baseline groups, the difference in time 2 scores between those who rated emotional support to be greatly important (higher score) and not as important (lower score) was not significantly different. The finding sits in contrast to research by Cutrona et al. that suggests emotional support may have broader benefit than instrumental support.

One explanation may be the limited variance in scores for perceived importance of emotional social support. Overall, emotional support was perceived to be highly important among all survey participants; the mean score on importance was 3.58 out of a possible 4 for the entire sample group. As such, the low/high groups were in actuality dichotomized between those who perceived available emotional support to be important and those who perceived it as highly important. The effect of perceived importance of emotional social support would be better determined if the groups represented greater contrast in perception on the importance of social support. One way would be to introduce into the study a control group of disadvantaged workers who were being integrated into non-social purpose enterprises (e.g., job placement or employment with a private employer), where work relations are not expected to be especially supportive for comparison.
An unexpected finding was that none of the social support measures examined significantly contributed to gains in self-efficacy for employees or training participants. In theory, self-efficacy is developed and upheld through influences that could be informed by any number of social supports examined in this study. According to Bandura (1997), self-efficacy is realized in four principal ways: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences through social modelling, verbal persuasion or social evaluation, and self-evaluation on physiological and emotional stress responses. A number of scale items examined under emotional support (e.g., manager/supervisor who offers encouragement and praise on a regular basis and is patient and understanding, and trust and friendship with others who faced similar barriers to employment) describe situations of social persuasions (e.g., positive performance feedback) and modelling opportunities, where visualizing similar others persist and succeed in the workplace can also raise the observer’s self-belief (i.e., ‘if they can do it I can too’) (Bandura 1997). Similarly, items examined under the practical work social support scale, including flexibility in work schedule and work tasks, tutorial instruction from managers/supervisors, and referrals to work or non-work related supports (e.g., skill training or housing-related referrals) conceivably do remove barriers to success at work, and as such, foster opportunity for mastery experiences. Mastery experiences, or successful performances, are considered the most influential feedback on personal capabilities that can strengthen self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura 1997). However, successes that are accomplished, but with external support, may alter the self-perception of that success; they may “carry little efficacy value because they are likely to be credited to external aids rather than to personal capabilities” (Bandura 1997, p. 83). This assertion aligns with research on social support that differentiates between visible and invisible support, which finds visible support that communicated inefficacy to recipients may be less effective, where invisible support, received by
a person without awareness of the assistance, may be most helpful in reducing distress under the
effect of a stressor (Bolger and Amarel, 2007).

In the survey, participants were asked to consider specifically the importance of each item of
social support to their work outcomes. The recognition of the significance or helpfulness of the
social support to their work performance may be internalized as dependence or inefficacy.
While having valued social support around may signal to the person a reassurance of worth (self-
esteem) and a confidence in a positive future (optimism), in contrast, the perceived necessity of
such support may dissuade people of their own capabilities. Although perceived social support
in this study did not significantly influence changes to self-efficacy, the effects of invisible or
imperceptible social support (available or received), or perhaps even some combination of
visible / invisible social support on self-efficacy warrants further investigation, given the
importance of building self-efficacy to work outcomes and the theoretical basis for a positive
association between self-efficacy and social feedback that does not diminish self-belief. As with
self-efficacy, changes to vocational identity was not related to the level or relevance of social
support.

Despite the largely unexplored association between social support and vocational identity, the
relationship was investigated here, given the importance of vocational identity to a person’s
overall, long-range occupational trajectory. Different studies have examined the relevance of
vocational identity to workers who face employment challenges. Employability, operationalized
as a construct incorporating career identity and social support as well as other dimensions, was
found to predict job search intensity, self-esteem, and re-employment among unemployed job-
seekers accessing government employment centres in Australia (McArdle et al. 2007).
Another study examines “worker role identity” development among women with disabilities who were transitioning out of domestic violence shelters (Helfrich et al. 2006). Contrary to the researchers’ hypothesis that identity in the worker role would be imperative to the women as they attempt to establish their independence, the study found a general ambivalence towards the worker role, with women choosing other roles to nurture and develop that too had been affected by experiences of disability and domestic violence (e.g., the roles of mother, church member, community participant) (Helfrich et al. 2006). Where service agencies have traditionally expected and pushed for more immediate work outcomes, the authors proposed instead interventions that allow for work role explorations and skills development. In settings where accommodations can effectively address disability related challenges and foster “feelings of competency and achievement” for those with limited formal education and inconsistent work history, women can begin to “attach personal meaning to the significance of work” for work identity formation (Helfrich et al. 2006, p. 327). Although the current study found no relationship between vocational identity and the amount or perceived importance of social support, the prevalence of the supports in social purpose enterprises is in-line with the intervention approach envisioned by Helfrich, Badiani, and Simpson (2006) as being essential for the worker role identity development.

**The social purpose enterprise effect**

Although changes in self-efficacy and vocational identity were not significantly influenced by practical or emotional social support, workers still improved upon those personal resources between time 1 and time 2, with the magnitude of those benefits being greater for those with low baseline. These results reflecting differential gains are consistent with other research on employment intervention (Creed et al. 1998; Creed et al. 2001; Denny et al. 2011). But contrary
to those same studies, significant improvements were found even for participants with high baseline scores prior to joining their organizations. With the exception of vocational identity, high baseline self-esteem, optimism, and self-efficacy groups on average still experienced significant (albeit much more subtle) gains on those same personal resources. This suggests that outside of the effects of social support, social purpose enterprise as an intervention still broadly benefited all participants, although not equally. The much smaller gains for the high baseline group may be the result of a ceiling effect.

To the question of whether interventions that result in differential outcomes should screen out participants expected to experience the least benefit (i.e., persons with high baseline) (Eden and Aviram, 1993), some researchers are explicitly against this proposed practice citing ethical concerns (Denny et al. 2011) as well as highlighting the role higher baseline individuals have in these intervention programs as potential support providers (e.g., as peer models / mentors) (Creed et al. 1998). Furthermore, there may be any number of benefits outside of those that have been investigated that would affect participants equally, regardless of their baseline measures on personal resources.

Practical implications for work engagement

In this study, given that the amount of social support bore no influence on changes to wellbeing, the findings suggest it may be less the quantity of available support but rather the perceived relevance of the social support that influences the gains in personal resources that can be made for people most limited in those resources. This finding is specific to the context of social purpose enterprises, where participants were largely expected (and found to be) in environments with high quantity of available social support. Were the study to include disadvantaged workers
in and outside of social purpose enterprises, who as a group would be expected to experience a large range of work-centred social support, the quantity of social support may well be demonstrated to influence changes to the personal outcomes of employees and training participants, but further research is required.

However, within the social purpose enterprise model pertaining to workers with the lowest self-esteem and optimism, the results suggest that the benefits of social support are contingent on the recipients themselves finding the support as beneficial. This finding means there is more to supporting workers than just instituting processes that are generally thought of as supportive, even if they have been previously successful in other organizations or with other workers. Supports should match the specific demands faced by the particular worker, extended in a way that will be interpreted as helpful for the particular person. Although it may require an even more interventionist approach to supporting their workers, given the potential of self-esteem and optimism towards fostering resilience and other positive outcomes, attention in matching supports to participants and to the way supports are received should allow social purpose enterprises to maximize the benefits of the social supports already available from within. This finding substantiates in part the idea that those in more vulnerable positions would benefit more from a social purpose enterprise environment, particularly where the social support available perceivably matches their needs.

Policy implications and broader contribution to social enterprise research

Policy recommendations by Canadian advocates of employment-focused social enterprises include proposals that would entrench the legitimacy and strengthen the financial position and business capacity of these organizations. Some proposals that have been put forth are: social
purpose enterprises’ formal inclusion within the complement of government employment programs as an option that provides participants with “customized” employment supports; program compensation for their training and employment support role; wage subsidy for their employees; more procurement opportunities; and access to business development support) (Enterprising Non-Profit 2014).

On the proposals relating to employment and training supports, findings of this study suggest that, as important as it is to secure actual funding for the supports, it is also necessary to establish a policy framework and funding arrangements that protect the organizations’ flexibility in mobilizing different social supports on the ground. This may be key to working with participants facing diverse challenges, where organization staff not only requires the understanding and resources, but also the ability or discretion to be responsive in connecting the right supports to the right person. The results of this study suggest that an appropriate match is of importance. Furthermore, evaluation frameworks need to be considerate of the ways in which benefits are realized through social supports (e.g., measuring the quantity of social support mobilized may not be the best indication of benefit realized from the supports). Beyond application within the social purpose enterprise model, improved understanding of the dynamics of social support can have relevance for a variety of community-based programing (e.g., newcomer settlement; youth engagement). But more broadly against the normative concept of social enterprise in the public domain, of the entrepreneurial nonprofit self-financing its social mission, the elaborate and complex social support processes at the centre of this study – and the financial and opportunity costs required for their facilitation – once again raise questions of whether any expectation of financial self-sufficiency (or even substantive reduction in government funding support) on the part of these organizations is realistic or reasonable.
Lastly, this study’s findings offer interesting avenues to extend existing areas of research on social purpose enterprises. For example, neo-institutional analyses of employment-focused social enterprises often centre on the isomorphic pressures placed upon them given their unique position of being at the crossroads of two sectors (private and social service) (Cooney 2006; Bode et al. 2006). But social purpose enterprises can be examined as a distinct population with its own isomorphic pressures onto itself, particularly around workplace social support. Findings of this study point to homogeneity in the broad categories and abundance of social support among organizations examined, but also variations (heterogeneity) in how helpful the supports were actually perceived to be by participants. It may be of interest to examine whether there is evidence of institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) with the adoption of social support processes by organizations, particularly the practical and instrumental supports. Given the suggestion that supports need to match the specific needs of workers for benefits to be realized, at least some of the uniformly available social supports among so many organizations may have been expended unnecessarily (or in some cases, in ways that did not engender receptivity by workers). If there is institutional isomorphism relating to the social support processes within the social purpose enterprise population, this study adds perspective on its potential effects on the worker population. Ultimately, knowledge development on the social support aspects of social purpose enterprises can contribute to the already dynamic field of social enterprise research.

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Study 3
Worker experiences of social support in social purpose enterprises

Introduction
Social support is an important feature of our social relations that has the potential to sustain and enhance wellbeing. Although social support is often considered assistance realized through our own personal networks with family or through friendships we establish organically, support can also be realized through formalized relationships in organizational settings (e.g., guidance counsellors, mentorships at work). Workplace social support has been examined to explore its role in reducing occupational stress and improving job satisfaction (House, 1981; Moeller & Chung-Yan, 2013). But in social purpose enterprises, behind the supportive features of work and training may be the more explicit goal of addressing workers’ overall wellbeing in addition to work-related outcomes. Using an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach, this qualitative study aims to explore how participants in social purpose enterprises experience social support within their organization, to understand the meaning and influences of being supported from the perspective of participants.

Social purpose enterprises and social support
In Canada, social purpose enterprises housed largely by nonprofit organizations provide employment and job training opportunities for individuals who have experienced persistent challenges finding and maintaining employment. While their supportive features can include modified work processes such as flexibility in scheduling, workload, and pace of work, and additional coaching and training, other instrumental supports reported also include facilitating
access to needed services (e.g., counselling, case management), education/development opportunities (e.g., financial literacy workshops, life coaching), and material benefit (e.g., food support) (Enterprising Non-Profit, 2015).

Although research has offered some insights into the purpose and content of these supports in social enterprises (i.e., what they are and why they are available), this study takes a more in-depth look at how the supports are received by the workers and training participants themselves. This study takes the position that the supports within social purpose enterprises are forms of “social support” in that social relations are central to their realization in some way. Examining supports as social supports also allows us to introduce social support theory to help interpret the ways supports may be perceived and received by participants.

*Selected theories on social support*

Social support is the “flow of emotional concern, instrumental aid, information and/or appraisal (information relevant to self-evaluation) between people” (House 1981, p. 26). Emotional support can include concern, empathy, or persuasions of acceptance and belonging. Instrumental assistance can include financial, material, or service support. Informational or appraisal support can be the guidance to problem-solving or advice that re-interprets self-evaluation or the environment. The reported supportive features of social purpose enterprises can belong to any of the three types of social support, with some like additional coaching support potentially encompassing all three kinds of social support as part of its process.

Although supports may be extended with the intention to benefit, research suggests supports are not always received as being beneficial. Social support may be more effective when delivered invisibly to recipients, or in a subtle enough way that the supports are received without being
interpreted as such (Bolger & Amarel, 2007). The hypothesis is that the advantage of invisible support lies in the impossibility of conveying inefficacy to the recipient, given the support is completely outside their awareness. Support that conveys inefficacy (e.g., ineptitude, dependence) may be ineffective or potentially heighten the distress of those being assisted or comforted.

Cutrona, Cohen, and Igram (1990) theorize that contextual factors, those besides the actual content of the support, affect how people judge the helpfulness of the support. The contextual factors found influential include relational closeness of the support provider, spontaneity of support, and whether support extended matches the support desired by recipients. The idea of optimal matching support was carried further in several other studies. Broadly, the helpfulness of informational support was found to be more context-specific, while emotional support may be received more positively across wider contexts (Cutrona et al., 1990; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992). Moreover, where informational support following emotional disclosure (i.e., mismatched support) predicted perception of partner insensitivity, mismatched emotional support following request for advice was not associated with perceived insensitivity by recipients (Cutrona, Shaffer, Wesner, & Gardner, 2007).

This study is guided by the broad research question: how do participants recognize and experience social support within social purpose enterprises? Adhering to the phenomenological approach, the study begins by closely examining the participants’ descriptive accounts of supportive experiences in social purpose enterprises. Only then does the analysis move on to interpret, with the help of theory, how participants came to their account of the experiences of support.
Methodology

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a qualitative research approach that draws from hermeneutic (interpretive) phenomenology and is attentive to idiographic traditions (Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Although there are different approaches within phenomenological research, they all share a commitment to unveiling the deeper meanings of a phenomenon through people’s lived experience. Researchers who work within the descriptive phenomenological tradition adhere most faithfully to Husserl’s philosophy (Tuohy et al., 2013). Descriptive phenomenological research seeks to distill the subjective understanding people have of their experiences with a particular phenomenon into a “universal essence” of that phenomenon (Creswell, 2006, p. 58). By “bracketing” any preconceptions, researchers aim to capture participants’ experience directly as lived and perceived through their consciousness, to return knowledge to a “pre-reflective state” or “purest form… before being corrupted by attitudes, prejudices and other influencing factors” (Tuohy et al., 2013, p.18).

Hermeneutic phenomenologists (e.g., Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty) build upon Husserl’s work but challenge the extent to which this type of bracketing is possible. Concepts such as dasein (‘being there’), ‘fore-structure’, and ‘life-world existential themes’ underscore the ‘worldliness’ of all experiences and knowledge. The assumption is that all experiences and understanding are situated within a world full of existing meanings, rooted in time and space, embodied, and relational to others with whom we share our world (Smith et al., 2009; Tuohy et al., 2013). While hermeneutic phenomenology maintains an interest in bringing into awareness the ‘essence’ of a phenomenon that may be obscured under its ‘appearance’, it does so from the position that no experience and associated meanings can be context-free (i.e., the phenomenological essence
sought is not universal but context-specific). All experiences and understanding come by way of human interpretation, and IPA begins from this interpretive position. IPA is described as a “double hermeneutic” process whereby the researcher endeavors to make sense of the way research participants make sense of their own experience (Smith, 2011, p.10). While acknowledging the authenticity of people’s accounts of their own reality, IPA requires that the researcher helps to bring into awareness any obscured understanding of the phenomenon under study. The hidden meanings may be outside the participants’ consciousness or otherwise omitted from participants’ own descriptive accounts (e.g., for social desirability reasons).

In hermeneutic phenomenology as in IPA, the intention of bracketing is not to detach the phenomenon from fore-structure. On the contrary, by acknowledging previously established understanding (e.g., existing interpretations and theories), the goal is for the researcher to be mindful of any preconceptions when opening up to participants’ experiences, which should always remain the primary concern. Only having engaged with the participants’ experience would the researcher be able to understand the relevance of the fore-structure (Smith et al., 2009; Tuohy et al., 2013).

Lastly, IPA is idiographic and advocates being attentive to the particulars of individual experiences. To understand experiences that are at once unique to the person but also a part of the broader, relational world, IPA examines each case in detail before moving on to search for patterns across cases (Smith et al., 2009). In comparison to certain strands of grounded theory that set out to establish generalizable claims, working with larger sample sizes and higher volume of data until the point of thematic saturation, IPA aims to explore thematic convergence and divergence within a small select group (Brocki & Wearden, 2006), with attention to “the particular way in which these themes play out for individuals” (Smith, 2011, p.10).
“IPA has the more modest ambition of attempting to capture particular experiences as experienced for particular people” (Smith, 2009, p.16). Given its goals, sample sizes in IPA studies are typically small, often between 5 and 10 participants, but also include the single-case (Smith, 2004). Larger sample sizes can pose challenges, particularly to the process of rendering themes and determining the level of prevalence required for a theme to be deemed salient to a phenomenon (Smith, 2011). To understand experiences of social support for a particular group (i.e., workers who have faced challenges to employment) within a specific context (i.e., in affiliation with a social purpose enterprises), IPA was considered an appropriate choice for the study.

Social support from the recipient perspective has been examined phenomenologically (Biederman, Nichols, & Lindsey, 2013; King, Willoughby, Specht, & Brown, 2006), and more specifically with IPA (Warwick, Joseph, Cordle, & Ashworth, 2004). Similar but in reverse order to Warwick et al.’s IPA research on social support, data analysis in this study occurs in two stages: first inductively (data-driven), then deductively (theory-driven).

**Procedures**

The data for this qualitative study were collected as part of another larger mixed-methods study involving participants of social purpose enterprises across Ontario. Nine people from Toronto took part in the interviews. Although the matter of sample size is specific to the context of each individual study, nine participants are consistent with the sample sizes of other IPA studies exploring social support, wellbeing, and work in different contexts. These include studies that have examined experiences of social support for women with chronic pain (N=8) (Warrick et al.,
2004), men transitioning from incarceration to life and employment in the community (N=6) (Aresti, Eatough, & Brooks-Gordon, 2010), and art-making and the subjective wellbeing of women with cancer (N=12) (Reynolds & Lim, 2007).

In this study, the group of nine is a subsample of people who participated in the survey of the larger study about the experience at their organization, and had volunteered at the end of the survey to be interviewed at a later time. Six participants were interviewed in person and three over the phone. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted on average approximately fifty minutes. The interview protocol included questions that guided discussion on work-centred social supports specifically planned for this study, as well as questions on participants’ overall experience and other asset areas under the Sustainable Livelihoods framework related to the mixed-methods study. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Interview participants received $50 cash for their involvement. They were not told of the incentive at the time they volunteered to be contacted for the interview.

Participants

Participants were involved with social purpose enterprises that engaged in a variety of business activities. These consist of interpretative service, courier service, food service, specialty retail, information technology, print service, and retail and training for microentrepreneurs. Although the microentrepreneurs are considered self-employed, they received skills training and were supported in other ways through the social purpose enterprise, which also provided them with retail space to market their wares for a small percentage of their sales.
Broadly, these enterprises have a focus on youth, women leaving situations of violence or women broadly, persons with developmental disabilities, under-housed individuals, and more generally individuals who have experienced exclusion in the broader labour market.

Of the five women and four men who were interviewed, three were in job training and six were employed or self-employed with their social purpose enterprise at the time they volunteered for the interview, including one micro-entrepreneur who had transitioned into a full-time staff position at the supported social enterprises while continuing with the micro-business on the side. At the point of the interview following the survey, only four of the six remained employed through their supported enterprise. Of the other two, one person had been laid off but continued to volunteer at the enterprise, and another (a micro-entrepreneur) was taking time off for maternity reasons. Of the three who were job training at the time of the survey, one has moved on to full-time employment in the private sector, while the other two were seeking employment or other training opportunities.

Level I Analysis

As per IPA’s approach, the interview transcript of each participant or ‘case’ was analyzed independently, coded and organized as patterns merged into themes. In IPA, each case is examined “on its own terms, to do justice to its own individuality” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p.100). As such, the analytical process of each case is undertaken while bracketing, as much as appropriate, the influence from analyses of all previous cases. Once all cases have been examined, the themes were pooled, then grouped and clustered into higher ordered categories where appropriate.
First tier analyses were grounded in the participants’ phenomenological account of experiences with social supports through their work environment. My first interpretative act in this initial stage of analysis was to recognize and code as ‘supports’ any interactions where social supports were presented, particularly where descriptions of such events were brought up under a more general discussion of the participants’ overall experience at their social purpose enterprise. Although the participants were conscious of these interactions, they may not have interpreted them as provision of assistance but merely as pleasant social exchanges. Or if the participants found the supportive exchange unpleasant, they may not have considered the assistance an intended act of help. By first identifying enactments of social supports (irrespective of how they end up being received) I could then hone in on the understanding or associated meanings participants have of those experiences (positive, neutral, or negative). Social supports were coded and categorized as instrumental or emotional/appraisal using the definitions presented in the introduction of the paper. Although supports were identified through a priori categories, the participants’ experiential claims were explored inductively.

Second tier analyses extended the exploration beyond the meanings of supportive experiences to examine how participants came to those meanings. At this stage, theory was introduced to guide the analyses. Themes were brought back to the individual level and for each case, organized into tables. For each participant, themes were categorized under the headings: personal challenges, supports by type, and meanings of supports. Organizing the themes under table headings allows for side-by-side comparisons of themes between the categories, to investigate connections between themes across categories. This process was repeated for each case. Within-case patterns are then compared between cases to locate patterns across cases.
Findings (I)

Five prominent themes emerged from the first level of analysis: validation, being cared for and caring for others, empowerment and control, relief from everyday struggles, and social connectedness.

Validation

Validations can be acknowledgements of value and ability, by the self or others, unconditional of their personal situations or the challenges they face. Under the broad theme of validation are the subthemes: being valued, being believed-infinding self-belief, and acceptance.

Being valued

Social support can be experienced through verbal affirmations and reassurances of worth. The supports are often expressed as positive feedback or expressions of love and appreciation, experiences which can be uplifting and deeply gratifying for the recipients.

The coordinator…, she’s always saying, ‘Bless you; your work is so important.’ It’s just such a boost, you know. (Participant 1)

For one participant whose previous work experience was described as rigid and unchallenging, being able to take initiative and even receiving praise for those initiatives were noted features of the new job.

...they take the suggestion and say, ‘yeah, that’s a good idea.’ [They] appreciate what [it] is I do and tell me as well, which is a nice feeling. (Participant 9)
In some cases, meanings of the support can have much broader implications outside of participants’ current work life by finding associations with previous experiences and covering old wounds:

I guess I was going through this really rough patch, and (the life coach) looked me in my face and he said, “I love you, and there’s nothing you can do about it.” And when he said that, it was like that replaced my dad, my mom, and all those people that had done me wrong. (Participant 4)

**Being believed-in / finding self-belief**

Being presented with instrumental support can convey to recipients the willingness of others to believe in them and their employment potential. These social supports can range from job connections for workers to marketing opportunities for microentrepreneurs. One participant recalls her experience of landing her job placements, which were coordinated by her social purpose enterprise and eventually led to fulltime work:

They just took a chance (on me). They look at you, and if they feel the person is okay, they want the person, they’ll ask [the social enterprise] to assign the person the job. I think that’s really important...For example, like me, I’ve never had experience with food, making food, but the workplace gave me a chance. (Participant 2)

Similarly, for one microentrepreneur, the presence of instrumental supports (e.g., the free retail space offered by her social purpose enterprise) served as a signifier that her goals are achievable. “...having a store front, it roots your confidence in regards to, ‘this is possible’.” (Participant 8)

For the microentrepreneurs, the importance of believing in the viability of their own ventures was discussed also in relations to the struggles with family and friends, who sometimes failed to
see the potential of their business and resented their absences and the (financial) reinvestments they made into their businesses. In this case, support means believing in each other so they can believe in themselves.

So we do have those kinds of conversations, so we (microentrepreneurs) can be each other’s supports and push each other forward. It’s not like, ‘Don’t listen to him or her,’ but rather, ‘believe in what you are doing, and here are the reasons why.’ (Participant 8)

As illustrated above, social supports that are perceived to be supportive can signal to people that others’ believe in them and/or help bolster their own self-belief. But perceivably inadequate social support, or in one specific case, perceivably insufficient training support, wore on a participant’s already tenuous self-belief.

I kept worrying that I wasn’t doing such a great job…

…I felt like I was doing work that I needed to do, but I wasn’t trained enough to be able to do it properly. (Participant 4)

**Acceptance**

Participants mostly described their work environment as one that is welcoming, a place where they are free to be who they are, safe from judgements of others. Their reflections speak to a general perception of a supportive workplace, but also allude to certain specific modifications of the work process (e.g., pace of work, coaching).

It’s more of a neutral place where you can be yourself…Nobody’s behind your back rushing you to do this or that. (Participant 7)

I can make my mistakes here. (Participant 8)
They don’t particularly look for specific qualities in anyone. They take you the way you come in and work with you. (Participant 3)

But social support extended to convey acceptance and confidence in a person can be misdirected and lead to the opposite effect. The participant who feared hers skills were not up to par interpreted her manager’s show of support this way:

I was in tears all the time. I kept thinking I wasn’t good enough to do the job, so that was what I was trying to tell my boss. But she said, ‘There are other skills that you have.’ She was trying to encourage me. I guess it would take a lot of emotion for someone to build me up; they’d get exhausted by dealing with me. So I felt ostracized to some degree. So I’d feel bad. (Participant 4)

Instead of feeling accepted despite (perceived) skills limitations, the participant recognized the emotional toll taken on her manager for being supportive towards her, and wound up feeling more “ostracized” or alienated at the organization.

**Being cared for and caring for others**

Again, participants conveyed both a general sense of their social purpose enterprise as being a caring environment, and recounted specific social interactions that described the care work they received and performed. Some participants juxtaaped these experiences against previous employment experiences, while others noted them more generally as positive differences in their lives:

You’re not working for a big corporate conglomerate anymore who is just out there for the dollar. You’re working for an entity that’s more into the social gathering for the people that work for them, being there for moral support… (Participant 3)
It’s basically that there’s been people when I’m in trouble to talk with me.  
(Participant 5)

But expressions of care are not unidirectional (i.e., others to self), nor are they strictly one-to-one reciprocal. Rather, supports are realized from multiple directions, and for some, they are seen as mutual obligations towards everyone within their organization. Resources, especially information, originating from the social purpose enterprise were often used to support others in participants’ own personal networks (e.g., forwarding notices of community support). For one participant, it was especially gratifying to be able to help others who were in a similar situation as she.

The other girl was so grateful. She did that training, she got a job... So she wrote me and she said, ‘You changed my life...’ (Participant 1)

But where participants had greater expectations of support than what was available to them through their social purpose enterprise, it left them feeling unsupported. One microentrepreneur perceived the level of instrumental support to be insufficient, having desired great assistance with developing her business.

We were looking for other supports, but it was more on yourself to find it...

…. The only thing that I really needed a bit of guidance with was doing my business plan. But I didn’t actually get it from them. I had to do it myself.  
(Participant 6)

*Empowerment and control*

Many participants associated a newfound sense of empowerment and control with their employment and training at the social purpose enterprises. Although participants may not
themselves attribute those feelings to social supports at their current workplaces, central to their realization of empowerment and control, as described, are the work and training processes that could be characterized as supportive, in that participants felt the processes influenced their work outcomes and overall wellbeing in some way. In some cases, these processes vary for different people within the same organization to suit individual preferences or needs, as participants explained. Further, the characteristics of the processes are often brought up when explaining the difference between working at a social purpose enterprise and their previous employment.

Different types of worker autonomy (e.g., freedom in the pace or method of work, decision-making on the job) or general opportunities to exercise control have been associated with employee commitment, satisfaction and broader wellbeing (Gagné & Bhave, 2011). Workplace flexibility that facilitates autonomy was an emphasized positive feature of work for a couple of participants. Describing a former work experience, one participant recalled being unchallenged and prohibited from initiating any of his own ideas or having any self-direction at work that led him to feel progressively demoralized at his previous employment.

But at my previous job, if I wanted to make (a) suggestion it would have been a ‘No, no, no, no, no.’ At [the social purpose enterprise]…If any one of us make a suggestion, they don’t turn it down, which is great. (Participant 9)

For another participant, flexibility and responsiveness in work arrangements meant he has the opportunity to work independently while his colleagues often worked in groups.

Some people (couriers) tend to either take other people out, or some people are sent out in group… (For me), I really enjoy the independence, the freedom. And this job has given me that… (Participant 3)
However, in other cases, participants expressed appreciation for more structured work and training processes where there is clarity and precision to work rules and functions. Comparing a previous work experience as stressful, “erratic” and “confusing,” one participant valued her formalized training at the social purpose enterprise as being thorough and methodical. In training she learned the ‘ethical principle’ of interpreting that guides her in all her decision-making at work. She was even given pre-emptive information about potential difficult situations that she and her colleagues may encounter on the job. The prescriptive and deliberate guidance she received made her feel prepared, and having clearly defined rules to rely on gave her confidence in her decision-making when dealing with clients.

…being able to say no (to clients) and to draw the lines, it’s also such empowerment for me. (Participant 1)

However, in the case where more structured and rigorous training was desired but not received, the participant, already insecure about her own perceived competencies and feeling like she had to navigate her own learning, expressed feelings of being disoriented:

I was basically thrown in….

…I just need a little bit more structure. It was too free, way too free. (Participant 4)

In this example, more structured work and training may have offered the participant the sense of control she sought.
Relief from everyday struggles

Participants discussed a variety of ways that instrumental supports realized through their workplace have helped to ease day-to-day challenges, including assistance with food, communication, and chronic health conditions. Referring to the free lunches at his job, one participant said plainly, “Obviously it helps subsidize the finances” (Participant 3).

Where language is the barrier, sometimes the instrumental support is as simple as assistance with a phone call.

…sometimes the (doctor’s) assistant speaks very fast, and I ask my manager to make the appointment for me. And she’s okay, she says, “I can help you with whatever.” And that’s really nice. (Participant 2)

Another example is where the social purpose enterprise facilitated computer equipment for a participant to set up a home office. The reduced travelling and greater control over his work environment (e.g., temperature/humidity) has helped him manage his severe chronic pain for the first time ever. On being able to control his physical work environment:

… That’s the treatment (where) I don’t need the pain medication and so forth.

…I’m able to actually get things done because of how I’m finally set up with a home office and the home space that I need. (Participant 5)

Supports are experienced as improvements in daily lives, often in small ways that makes their everyday experience a bit easier.
Social connectedness

Employment and training at social purpose enterprises are processes that connect participants to the larger community in different ways. For some, the process can facilitate a person’s emergence from social isolation. For others, it bridges them to occupational networks and groups that were previously inaccessible. It can help form the basis of a social safety net: “Basically, that’s become my social network now that I have one.” (Participant 5)

The supports (e.g., organized networking events) can also be leveraged for professional gains:

   It actually opened up a gateway for meeting new people…being able to market with them…and seeing what kinds of other opportunities they can guide me into. (Participant 6)

But more broadly, having support typically meant not having to figure it all out by themselves.

   It’s good to know I have someone to go to. It’s difficult to do it on your own. (Participant 8)

Level II Analysis

The initial analyses focused on the nature of the experiences of social support as lived by participants, bracketing as much as possible the existing influences from theories on social support. From the primary analyses, we find that while positive support experiences can engender positive personal meanings, the antithesis of those meanings can also emerge from negative or inadequate support experiences.

The following second tier analyses explore the contextual factors that influence how participants come to find meaning in their experiences with social support, and how participants perceived
the support exchanges (provided, sought, and received). The secondary analyses are guided by two particular areas of social support theory: theory on social support visibility and optimal matching support.

**Findings (II)**

*Addressing needs and goals through understanding*

In discussion, all participants shared examples of instrumental supports they’ve experienced through their social purpose enterprise (i.e., material, informational, financial or otherwise practical assistance) while only about half (five of nine) offered examples of emotional support (i.e., encouragement or appraisal support). However, as findings from the primary analyses above illustrate, instrumental supports were often associated with meanings of emotional sustenance (e.g., being cared for, being believed-in, control and empowerment). Seemingly, instrumental supports are often interpreted by participants in ways that address emotional wellbeing.

Broadly, where participants interpreted their supports positively, the content of the supports matched the nature of some challenge described during their interview, either personal or work-related. For example, where English language challenges were noted, the participant noted communication support from a colleague at work even for personal business outside of work. Often, the more salient a particular challenge was during discussion, the greater the emphasis was on the matched support over the other supports mentioned. For example, with one participant who repeatedly brought up her extreme shyness, anxiety, and lack of confidence prior to joining her organization, there was a corresponding emphasis on emotional/appraisal support
throughout (e.g., praise and encouragement), “… it was so pleasing, to hear that we were such great students…” (Participant 1).

Participants’ experiences of support in both content and meaning were largely grounded to some aspect of the challenges they shared during the interview. The contextual importance of supportive experiences, then, can be interpreted to account for the reason not all participants were represented under each theme emerged from the initial analyses (i.e., not all participants shared the same meanings).

Negative experiences including disappointment were associated with support that was mismatched in both volume and content. Several participants expressed that they had desired more training support than they received. “I thought it would have been more teaching us and guiding us, and helping us” (Participant 6). Another participant felt a larger teaching roster would have been more appropriate given the industry he was training for, “…That was a problem too; with two teachers you can’t learn as much…” (Participant 7).

But beyond unmet expectations, examples of mismatched support include assistance extended that was contrary to the needs or goals of the person. One participant recounted her inability to cope with one central aspect of her job, soliciting new business by phone: “I went in not having the greatest confidence, and…I just couldn’t do it because I was afraid” (Participant 4).

The way in which others responded may have wound up impeding her long range goals. In her mind, the level of distress she showed, in part from job task-related anxiety but also with other depression-related struggles, resulted in the removal of a series of job duties central to her position and the skills she had hoped to develop in that role, beyond the retail skills she already possessed.
[The job they hired me to do], it did not happen as much, with exception of social media posts and even that was taken away. I was doing mostly customer service, store level work, which was what I was trying to avoid doing. (Participant 4)

Although direct removal of the stressor can sometimes be considered an ideal ‘matched’ support – in that it directly removes the cause of distress, in this case the participant felt outright removal of job duties led to her missing out on the skills development that should have been integral to her overall experience with the social purpose enterprise. The uncertainty with which her distress was handled also brought on additional hassle in the workplace.

So (with them) I think it struck up a lot of ‘I don’t know what to do - Are you okay?’ …Every time, I said, ‘I’m fine. Had a moment, I’m well and good; over it. I just need to work.’ (Participant 4)

Where ‘not knowing what to do’ may have been at the root of the mismatched support in the example above, support that conveys to people a clear understanding of their needs and goals, along with a willingness to help meet them, can be interpreted as instances of matched support.

One participant describes the debriefing sessions that are integral to her job:

First of all they understand. They understand the type of work that they do......Here, people always know. Because they are working with the situation (that they understand), they even anticipate, ‘Okay, this is going to be a hard assignment. Call me after you do the assignment and tell me if everything went fine.’ (Participant 1)

Another participant speaks more generally on his social purpose enterprise’s commitment to being flexible and responsive in the way they support their workers.
We bring them on board; they get trained, for as long as it needs to be. If they need more training, we can work with them slower, that’s the type of thing that’s great about being here. (Participant 9)

A process of appraisal, of self and others

Participants recognized social supports in their wide-ranging forms. Many of the examples given so far are of received supports, concrete examples of assistance provided that participants themselves recognized as pleasant or even helpful exchanges, but not always as forms of assistance (i.e., in the context of support). They were verbal and/or behavioural (e.g., positive feedback, additional coaching), informally tendered (e.g., encouragement amongst peers) and formally organized (e.g., networking opportunities). But participants also perceive support in a general sense, as an understanding or expectation that their organization is with them in their corner: “I know my agency is standing by me… I do know they are supportive of me…” (Participant 1)

Consistent with theory which suggests support that conveys inefficacy to the recipient can lead to feelings of inadequacy and contribute to further distress, this study finds evidence with one participant in particular. For the one participant [p.4] who most readily appraised exchanges of emotional and instrumental support negatively, her accounts were often associated with perceptions of inconveniencing others while receiving support, or an awareness that the supports she was receiving were in relation to perceived performance issues.

But other than at the point of receipt of support, participants also shared ways in which appraisals can occur at various points in the support process to influence the actual flow or outcome of social support. In one case, perception that support is available was enough to help someone cope with a challenge independently, stemming actual request for support.
I never do, but maybe I should. If I complain (about clients to my organization), they would investigate...I don’t really go there because it just goes with the job. (Participant 1)

In determining whether to seek support, a person may also assess the cost to themselves or the potential support provider. One participant described feeling stigmatized at one of her job placements organized by her social purpose enterprise, and why she decided against seeking support.

The staff (at the placement), yeah, they were not very friendly, you know…you can feel that they were – how to put it, like they had a good life, and we were poor persons. I don’t like the feeling. (Participant 2)

When asked if she discussed her feelings with her supervisor/instructor at the social purpose enterprise, she explained: “No, because my instructors were so nice. I don’t want them to feel bad.” (Participant 2)

In another case, one participant describe engaging with an instrumental support, free onsite health and relaxation sessions organized by his social purpose enterprise, but discontinued because his hearing impairment inhibited realization of the benefits intended with the support.

I find it very hard to stay with the class because I can’t hear what the instructor is saying. So I’m constantly trying to look at the person beside me or in front of me, trying to copy what they’re doing. I’m not getting the relaxation feature that you’re supposed to get when you [are in the class]. (Participant 3)

Instead of bringing attention to the difficulties he had in participating, he chose to self-select out of the class. From various participants’ accounts, missed opportunities for effective support stem not only from the way the support is communicated on the part of the provider (e.g., sensitively
without injury to the self-esteem or self-efficacy of another), but also on whether a person will initiate support-seeking based on their assessment of how their request will be received, and how that request will reflect upon them.

Discussion

Experiential claims on social support in social purpose enterprise

Using IPA, the first part of this study centres its attention onto the meanings of experiencing social support as lived by a small group of participants of social purpose enterprises in Toronto. By first leaving behind much of the extant social support theory, initial analysis drew out five emergent themes: Feelings of validation, self-belief and confidence from others, care, control, and social connectedness.

These themes converged across positive experiences of support shared by participants and are reflected in the wide range of potential effects of social support that have been theorized (Shumaker & Brownell, 1984). However, participants’ experiences diverge from the central themes in situations where supports were perceived to be inadequate or otherwise unsatisfactory. Stemming out of negative experiences, there were feelings of alienation instead of acceptance; inattention instead of care; disorder instead of control. In other words, the meaning of supportive experiences appears to be influenced by perception of support quality and sufficiency.

Interpreting how meanings of social supports came to be

Second tier analysis allowed for introduction of theory to further interpret how participants made sense of their encounters with social support. Although the concept of matching support could
not be operationalized in the same way as previous studies (e.g., where types of support provided are compared with the ones solicited in a given situation [Cutrona et al., 1990]), within-case comparisons broadly finds congruence between the challenges participants experience and their accounts of social supports in both content and meaning, where their perception of supports were positive. In keeping with the optimal matching support model, participants expressed disappointment and even emotional upset over supports they found lacking, as these were contrary to their larger aims and unreflective of their needs.

As prescribed by IPA, by giving the case of exception the attention it warrants, the analyses sought commonality between themes from the one case that appears oppositional to themes emerging from the others. Both theories on optimal matching support and support visibility offer insight to the exceptional participant’s often (but not always) challenging interactions of support from others. Aside from experiencing mismatched supports, which other participants also experienced, the enactment of support towards the exceptional participant led to injury of her self-regard, which was unique to her case. In particular, the participant was the only one who relayed feelings of inadequacy and dependency directly through interactions involving receipt of social supports of various sort. Theory on visibility of social support was especially helpful to interpreting her strong feelings. The contrast of the exceptional experience helped to reveal added complexity to social support realization within social purpose enterprises. The experience of social support is as much about the object/nature of the support as it is about how the support is communicated.
Other influences of self-efficacy on interpretation of training support

‘Control and empowerment’ was a recurring theme characterizing the experience with supportive work processes, but the specific nature that makes the work processes supportive and welcome differ for different individuals. Specifically, prescriptive, structured processes with clearly defined rules were welcomed by participants who, in the interviews, emphasized their lack of self-confidence prior to joining their social purpose enterprise. Conversely, for participants where confidence was not an expressed challenge, work processes that were flexible and self-directed were often expressly preferred.

Research has found that different modes of training may result in different personal and work outcomes, depending on the employee’s level of self-efficacy. For example, new employees with lower self-belief in their own technical abilities had lower anxiety level with more formalized training and orientation, whereas more self-study training was associated with heightened anxiety level for those with lower educational self-efficacy (Saks, 1994). In another study (Jones, 1986), new employees with lower self-efficacy responded to more institutionalized methods of training and integration by engaging their work in more conforming ways; those with higher self-efficacy may attempt to innovate their work processes even where their roles are institutionally and clearly prescribed.

As Bandura (1997) suggested, modifying training and onboarding or organization socialization processes to suit workers’ self-efficacy level can promote more effective skills development and workplace adaptation. For disadvantaged workers integrating into social purpose enterprises, these strategies may be even more influential to work outcomes. For those feeling less confident and uncertain in their self-belief, management-led support that clarifies work roles and offer structured guidance can help relief anxiety by reducing workplace ambiguities (Bandura, 1997).
For others who are confident in their abilities from the start, supportive work processes that are flexible and promote autonomy may be more enabling of their potential and further efficacy development. As workers with lower self-efficacy at job entry begin to develop self-efficacy on the job, a shift in work processes from more prescriptive to more autonomous may well be a way to support their continued development. Similar to findings on supports more generally, it appears work process supports should match the particularities of the individual in order to optimize effectiveness.

**Implications of findings**

In this study, participants of social purpose enterprises shared a wide variety of experiences to being socially supported. Many of the accounts were positive, with participants themselves active in supporting their colleagues and others in their social network. From participant accounts, a few missed opportunities for more effective supportive exchanges were also highlighted.

For social purpose enterprises to foster effective realization of social support, and there were many such examples from participants’ accounts, both the skillfulness of the support facilitator as well as the personal qualities of their support recipients are to be considered. The manner in which a support is communicated or facilitated can influence whether it is accepted, but individual characteristics (e.g., personality, personal history, cultural influences) may supersede the way a support is interpreted, however thoughtfully offered in the first place. Being responsive to participant reaction is one way support facilitators (managers/supervisors/colleagues) can ensure the benefits of supports are realized as intended. Repeated attempts with different support approaches can be a time consuming and costly process, especially where organizations are
already resource-limited, but the payoff is in supporting workers who are hardest to reach but can benefit the most from being supported.

Given exchanges of supports involve at least two active participants, clearly establishing the channels of support can also encourage the likelihood participants will initiate processes for support when needed. This can involve routinely affirming the positions of key people within social purpose enterprises as being established sources of support, while maintaining an organizational culture that promotes the shared responsibility of supporting each other in day-to-day practices.

Going forward, to understand the broader implications of the supportive experiences realized within social purpose enterprises, longitudinal research that follows participants’ transition into work and beyond, while tracking support realization throughout, can help to reveal associations between social support, work trajectories, and other areas of wellbeing for the longer term. There are a number of unanswered questions still. For example, do participant perception of a continued support change over time, changing the utility of support as well? Are social purpose enterprises able to be responsive to participants’ needs over long periods of time? Findings of this study suggest people experiencing supports that align with their goals and needs perceive their supports more positively, but are they also more likely to meet those goals and enhance other areas of their wellbeing?

For participants who transition out of social purpose enterprises into the broader job market, do they seek out social support elsewhere? Or did their experiences at the social purpose enterprise bolster their personal resources in a way that the flow of support can recede over time?
There is a variety of potential future research areas involving social support and social purpose enterprise, any of which can contribute to both programing within organizations as well as public policy for social purpose enterprises and people facing employment exclusion.

**Limitations**
Like IPA studies in general, the scope of this study is small with limited generalizability. The intimate nature of the study also meant that divergences in experience along broader socio-demographic groupings (e.g., ethno-culture background, immigrant status, marital status) would not have been revealed.

Further, the exploration of participants’ experiences of social support was based solely on the descriptions of participants, and as such, influences of social support that were truly invisible (completely outside of consciousness of participants) could not be explored in this study. Despite limitations, the nature and processes to social support realization revealed in this study offer an important glimpse of the overall experiences of employees and training participants of social purpose enterprises in Toronto.

**References**


Conclusion

Three studies: Summary of findings

In this thesis, three studies examined the experiences of social support through participation in social purpose enterprises. Although the studies employed different research approaches and engaged the perspectives of people from different sides of social support relationships (provider and recipient), emergent themes from all three studies converge to address the overarching research question of what influences contribute to more effective social support realization for participants in social purpose enterprises.

Beyond just a mapping of the range of social supports available, studies one and three in particular highlight the variety in support realization, from the types to the sources and directionality of social support, and both the anticipatory and responsive manner in which supports are initiated. From all three studies, findings point to the importance of matching social support to the needs and goals of the employees and training participants, and the relevance of how people actually perceive their experiences of social support. Quantitative findings suggest that experiencing more relevant social supports, as perceived by participants, may be associated with stronger development of personal resources such as optimism and self-esteem, particularly for participants with less-developed personal resources to begin with. Qualitative findings draw attention to the contextual factors including personal qualities that may influence appraisal of the support extended, and ultimately determine whether the support actually benefits the recipient. The contextual factors found across the studies include the source of the support and the level of trust in the supportive relationships, the personal situation in terms of needs and goals of the
support recipient, perceived impact on support provider, and the cultural appropriateness of the support. These findings broadly belong to three areas of consideration thought to be influential on social support realization: individual characteristics, relationship properties, and social or cultural conditions (House, 1981).

In these studies and consistent with theory, self-efficacy as a personal characteristic of the employees and training participants appears particularly salient to the discussion of social support. From the perspective of support providers such as managers and supervisors, social supports are often initiated with the intention to promote self-efficacy of employees and training participants. From the perspective of workers, personal level of self-efficacy appears to influence how supportive acts from others are interpreted and the type of work arrangements (organized and executed with support from others) may be better at promoting work and other personal outcomes. Further, social support that communicates a sense of inefficacy or dependence to the recipient may also affect the actual or perceived benefit of the support, and theory suggests this may occur regardless of the level of self-efficacy of the support recipient. Learnings from the three studies have the potential to inform programing within social purpose enterprises in a number of ways. In agreement with existing literature on supportive employment that has raised the issue of tailoring supports to participant needs, findings from this research offer insights on the process of matching the social supports to needs, and reveal patterns on what those potential support/need matches may be (e.g., more structured training may put less confident workers more at ease less at work entry).
Integrating theories on social support ultimately enabled this research to examine the various supportive elements to the social purpose enterprise experience in a more encompassing way. Besides drawing and learning from research on social support broadly, or even research that examines social support in workplaces in particular, this research also brings an alternative perspective to studies which examine supportive employment outside of social support theory, such as the supported employment model for workers with disabilities.

Research on supported employment has emphasized the potential for work integration supports (e.g., job coaches) to become barriers to work inclusion and integration themselves. The title of the paper by Rogan, Banks, and Howard (2000), “Workplace supports in practice: As little as possible, as much as necessary,” has been noted for aptly capturing the delicate balance required to determine the most appropriate amount and approach to support that would best facilitate inclusive and sustainable employment (Community Living Research Project, 2006).

The concept of optimal level of support has been explored in social support research, with concern being that overly involved social support may limit development of independence, determination, and adaptation of the support recipient, including their coping strategies and problem-solving skills that are vital to overcoming challenges (King, Willoughby, Specht, & Brown, 2006). Similar concerns on excessive support surfaced in the studies and were explored for their potential to reduce mastery experiences that would impede a workers’ development of self-efficacy.

The supported employment model also emphasizes the importance of engaging natural supports where possible, the everyday (non-professional) supports from co-workers or supervisor, in order to maintain work environments that are as similar to a typical workplace. Time spent with
professionalized support such as a job coach can be isolating and reduces bonding time with the rest of the work team, potentially excluding the person within the organization (Rogan, Banks, & Howard, 2000). Feelings of being alienated or “ostracized” were also explored in the third paper against social supports that were perceived to cause difficulty for the support provider or received in relations to perceived job performance issues. This example from the third study along with the broader concept of natural support can both be interpreted and further understood through theory on invisible social support, which suggests that supports delivered without recipient awareness or are conveyed in a subtle enough way that prevents recipient from developing a sense of inefficacy, dependence, or indebtedness, may be most beneficial; conversely, supports that are highly discernible as such can be ineffective or in some cases heighten distress for the recipient. In these ways, the broad range of theories on social support has helped to present a more cohesive account on the way supportive experiences through social purpose enterprises can improve the work outcomes and overall wellbeing of employees and training participants of these organizations.

**Limitations**

The studies did not explore in depth the tangible employment outcomes of workers of social purpose enterprises such as duration of employment, earnings, or hours worked per week in relations to the level or quality of the social support they received. For the scope of this study, it would have been too difficult to explore the direct relationship between social support and employment outcomes, given the demographic characteristics and additional influences that would also need to be considered. These influences relate to the heterogeneity of participants between and within organizations in terms of the specific barriers to employment, the skills and
experience gained at the social purpose enterprises, the sector in which they are being trained, participation in social assistance programs that limit earnings before claw-backs, personal employment goals and other factors that may influence employability. For readers who are interested strictly in the labour market outcomes of social purpose enterprises as vehicles for integrating people most excluded from more mainstream employment, this research falls short in terms of contributing to knowledge.

Future Research

The work of this thesis could be built upon in a number of different directions. For example, time series data used in the second study would definitely benefit from further research with actual longitudinal data. The challenge of collecting longitudinal data is that participants do not join social purpose enterprises as cohorts, especially where the positions are employment and not training. So in order to gather longitudinal data it would require coordination and commitment from organizations themselves, to help administer intake interviews or surveys to collect baseline information at the time of work entry, as well as at subsequent time points, across a number of organizations in order to obtain a sufficient sample size.

Where longitudinal information gathering is possible, it would be interesting to conduct not just a replication of the 2nd study, but to expand on the way matching support was operationalized. Being able to collect data on participants’ personal challenges and development goals along with data on their baseline wellbeing would allow for analyses that could examine whether higher perceived importance of social support (e.g., originally interpreted as having more relevant or
matched supports in 2nd study) is actually associated at time 2 with reduction in personal challenges or achievement of personal goals as initially defined by participants.

Longitudinal studies that follow participants who transition out of these organizations can also expand the scope of outcomes related to social support, to examine whether any positive influences of social supports achieved during their time at social purpose enterprises were enduring. For example, the personal resources of participants that have been built up during their time at these organizations, are they carried forward as participants transition into other work? Are the support channels that are developed in these organizations maintained even if people moved on?

Future studies that can incorporate measures on social support into large-scale employment outcome evaluation of workers in social purpose enterprises should be of great interest to policy makers, but such a study would be an ambitious undertaking given the diversity of participants as well as needing to account for organizational influences that can affect individual outcomes (e.g., organizational capacity that determines whether work is transitional or permanent, part-time or full time). More difficult still would be comparison studies on workers who are supported through social purpose enterprises versus more traditional labour market programming (e.g., job placement in non-social purpose enterprise firms), but determining whether any differences in outcomes from the two types of intervention can be associated with the way workers are socially supported at their organization can also be interesting avenue of further research and future policy development.
**Policy relevance**

In revealing the extensive coordination in time and effort that go towards facilitating social support realization on top of business operations, the studies underscore the argument to consider social purpose enterprises largely as modified social welfare organizations, which in addition to market income, often continue to be supported heavily by government and foundation funding, social procurement arrangements, private donations and volunteer contributions (Quarter, Ryan, & Chan, 2015).

Many participants of these organizations will continue to receive financial assistance through government programs while they work towards their own financial self-sufficiency (Quarter, Ryan, & Chan, 2015). The path towards greater financial stability is often slow and requires a mix of social assistance and employment income, where increased employment income is feasible and desired. There is no clearly drawn line between the realm of welfare and the realm of work, where the move from one side to the other can be made in a single leap, as conceived through welfare-to-work policies under the work-first era (Lightman, Mitchell, & Herd, 2010).

Employment for people facing multiple barriers may be predicated on continued social assistance and additional social support through work. In some cases supportive work arrangements and some level of social assistance will be required for the long-term. The first step to enacting policy on social purpose enterprises for work integration is to understand how these organizations facilitate work engagement for people most excluded by the broader labour market. A better understanding of the social support realization within these organizations points to at least two areas of opportunity on the policy front.

One concerns the funding reality of these organizations that affects their ability to support their workers effectively. Policies that create a more conducive environment for social purpose
enterprises to operate and grow can have a direct and positive impact on the wellbeing of participants of these organizations. Policy interventions can include core funding for certain essential social supports, capacity building opportunities for organizations, or social procurement arrangements for demand-driven growth that can potentially lead to higher wages and more paid work hours or training opportunities available for a greater number of people.

The second policy implication concerns the general understanding of what constitutes positive outcomes of labour market integration policies. For too long, the singular focus has been on the immediate concrete outcomes related to employment attachment and earnings, although more recently, there is increasing interest in exploring the broader social returns on investments in labour market programs. Presenting social purpose enterprises as vehicles for mobilizing social support through alternative work arrangements draws attention to the number of vulnerabilities faced by people most socially and economically excluded, of which employment is but one area requiring attention. Fostering safe and healthy employment opportunities for all people who are able to participate in employment requires commitment and long-range investment at the policy level. This research contributes to a growing body of literature that demonstrates the holistic way these organizations can address issues of long-term employment exclusion as well as individual and community wellbeing more broadly.

References

