

Examining the Air Travel Experiences of Individuals with Vision Disabilities
Using a Co-cultural Theoretical Lens

by

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A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

Approved October 2020 by the
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ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

December 2020

ABSTRACT

Traveling is one of the most enriching and fulfilling activities for most people. Yet factors such as crowded airports, long waiting queues, and inaccessible features of airports and airplanes often make traveling stressful for many individuals including those with disabilities. This qualitative phenomenological research study examined the underexplored area of traveling with a vision disability. Framed around a Co-cultural theoretical perspective, the study examined the lived experiences of vision impaired individuals with regard to receiving disability assistance services during air travel. The study specifically explored the communication strategies that vision impaired individuals employed to manage their assistance-related air travel needs. The study used in-depth interviews for data collection, and a combination of thematic analysis techniques for data analysis. Findings indicated four categories of assistance-related issues that vision impaired participants frequently experienced in their travel: personnel training issues, system issues, policy issues, and physical accessibility issues. The study also identified four Co-cultural communication orientations that participants used in navigating air travel: assertive accommodation, aggressive accommodation, assertive assimilation, and nonassertive assimilation. In addition, the study identified a new Co-cultural communication practice - normalizing for self. Findings of this research conclude that despite three decades since the passage of United States legislation to protect the rights of disabled people, vision impaired travelers still frequently experience inequitable air travel practices. The study offers recommendations on pressing issues concerning policies and regulations that can inform airline executives and federal legislators in facilitating a more equitable and pleasurable air travel experience for those with vision disabilities.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my loving parents who made this scholastic dream possible with their unconditional love and support in all the ups and downs of my life.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to extend my heartfelt appreciation for all those in my academic and personal life who have supported me throughout the course of my PhD program and have contributed to the successful completion of this dissertation. I would first like to thank Dr. Jeffrey Kassing, my dissertation chair and mentor. His continued support and guidance have been pivotal in my educational success and personal growth. Dr. Kassing always offered me a safe space to discuss, debate, and build my own ideas while providing just the right balance of academic freedom and constructive criticism that led me to push my own boundaries and achieve more. I thank him for his generous time in offering revisions, suggestions and edits that helped immensely with the dissertation writing process. Second, I would like to thank Dr. Benjamin Broome for encouraging me every step of the way and offering valuable insights with warmth and patience. I thank him for his tremendous support and for his open doors welcoming questions and concerns throughout these years. Finally, I thank Dr. Michael Zirulnik who offered the resources, expertise, and a critical eye to challenge my own assumptions and refine my ideas from conception to implementation, and writing. His guidance has helped me in becoming a better scholar and writer.

I would also like to extend my gratitude to the administrative staff of the Hugh Downs school of Human Communication who ensured a smooth experience for me as a graduate student. A special thanks to Heather Freireich for always being on top of things and going that extra mile to take care of all my administrative needs.

Acknowledgement of family goes without saying. I thank my parents for teaching me to believe in myself, and for their relentless support and faith in my abilities even in

the lowest of times. My husband, Nihanth, who has always been there for me through the thick and thin of graduate school and beyond. I thank him for being my pillar of strength and for enduring with me throughout this educational journey. My adorable two nephews whom I always found frolicking by my side when things seemed to overwhelm me at school. My sister and brother-in-law who have been instrumental in my pursuit of attending graduate school in the United States. I would also like to recognize my dissertation mascot who I named “Phokat” for being such a wonderful dissertation companion.

Finally, I thank the organizations who helped me in study recruitment, and to all those participants who offered their time to share their experiences with me for this research project. I also acknowledge the ASU Graduate School for the Completion Fellowship that offered significant financial support to complete my dissertation in the final year.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Study Overview

Travelling is one of the most liberating and enriching forms of human recreation that helps us become well-rounded individuals, as it opens our mind to new ideas, cultures, values, and experiences. Traveling has also become an integral part of many job descriptions. Yet, for some individuals, traveling, especially by air, can be a source of stress and anxiety (Darcy, 2012; McIntosh, Swanson, Power, Raeside & Dempster, 1998; Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005). Having a severe form of physical disability that affects one's daily functioning, typically requires the need for human assistance during traveling. As a result, much of how a person views the idea of traveling significantly depends on the quality of disability assistance that they receive during air travel. Research suggests that nearly 65% of all human interactions occur through nonverbal communication such as eye gaze, body movement, and facial expressions (Knapp, Hall & Horgan, 2013; Smith & Kandath, 2000). Interpersonal interactions may become complicated for individuals with vision disabilities who can not detect some of these nonverbal forms of communication. Interactions with the sighted may be even more challenging in public settings including airports. Airports are generally characterized as fast-paced and busy physical environments that are visually demanding. Most travelers are generally seen making extensive use of their sight, from reading sign boards, to taking trains, to going to the helpdesk for asking travel-related questions. The lack of accessible alternatives to visual cues at airports and on airplanes pose additional difficulties for vision impaired individuals. As a result, vision impaired individuals who travel independently often

request disability assistance services at the airport and onboard the plane. This study examines how vision impaired travelers who receive disability assistance services communicatively navigate air travel and how their interaction with the assistance personnel shapes their overall travel experience.

A communication framework that is particularly useful to meet the goals of this study is Co-cultural theory developed by Orbe (1998). Co-cultural theory focuses on the communicative practices of individuals belonging to traditionally marginalized groups including race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, disability, and sexual orientation (Orbe, 1998). With a focus on the intersection of culture, power, and communication, Co-cultural theory provides a framework for one basic question: how do Co-cultural group members use communication to negotiate their cultural identities with others (both like and unlike themselves) in a societal context where they are traditionally marginalized (Razzante & Orbe, 2018)? Examining the topic of air travel and vision disability from a Co-cultural communication lens offers a rich landscape to identify issues relating to disability awareness, assistance personnel training, and policy shortcomings commonly experienced—described in the words of travelers with vision disabilities.

Braithwaite, Emry, and Wiseman (1984) highlighted an important advantage of the Co-cultural theory approach; the tenants of Co-cultural theory guides researchers to focus on the views of people with disabilities instead of relying on the attitudes and behaviors of people without disabilities toward people with disabilities. The theory is grounded in the lived communicative experiences of marginalized Co-cultural group members and therefore contains a framework that legitimizes, validates, and affirms a wide range of standpoints occupied by individuals with disabilities (Fox, Giles, Orbe & Bourhis, 2000).

The purpose of this study is to understand perspectives of travelers with vision disabilities with a focus on their communicative experiences in light of existing disability assistance policies and practices as they relate to air travel. The study's goal is that understanding the perspectives, challenges, and experiences of individuals with vision disabilities through their lens of experience, will be useful in identifying some of the gaps in the system that may be of particular relevance to policy-makers within the airline industry, government, and special assistance staff trainers. This may ultimately contribute to more comfortable and dignified air travel experiences for individuals with vision disabilities.

Study Rationale

With the passage of legislation directed toward empowering people with disabilities such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 and the Air Carrier Access Act (ACAA) of 1986, there has been a steady increase in the presence and participation of these individuals in communities, workplaces, and social events as they are able to travel more independently. According to a recent report by the Open Doors Organization that looked at the spending trends and market scope of U.S. adult travelers with disabilities, more than 26 million adults with disabilities traveled for pleasure and/or business, taking 73 million trips between the years 2012-2014 (Lipp, 2015). A substantial increase in the spending rates of adults with disabilities on air travel was also noted – from \$13.6 billion annually in the year 2002 up to \$17.3 billion annually in 2014 (Lipp, 2015). Amid the growing number of travelers with disabilities, there has also been a steady increase in the number of disability-related complaints in air travel.

The Air Carrier Access Act (ACAA) of 1986 prohibits discriminatory treatment of persons with disabilities in air transportation and requires that the Secretary of Transportation regularly review all disability discrimination complaints received by air carriers. ACAA also requires the Secretary of Transportation to report annually to Congress on the results of the review. According to the Department of Transportation (DOT) Annual Report of 2019, a total of 36,930 complaints were received by U.S. and foreign carriers together (Annual Report on Disability-related Complaints, 2019). Overall, this equates to a 7.5 percent increase from the previous year in the number of disability-related complaints occurring while only a 4.99 percent increase of passenger enplanement over this same time was reported by air carriers. DOT expressed its inability to determine the reason for the year-over-year increase in disability-related complaints in the report. DOT also acknowledged that although the overall number of complaints may appear to be large, millions of people with disabilities in the U.S. travel by air each year and the vast majority of them do not file disability related air travel complaints (DOT, 2019, p.1).

The DOT annual report also indicates that the most frequently reported issue by vision impaired travelers relates to the failure to provide assistance. Issues of personnel training and assistance services have been a consistent theme documented in the findings of disability travel studies (Darcy, 2012; Major & Hubbard, 2019; Small, Darcy & Packer, 2010). Zorro (2016) examined the perceptions of people with reduced mobility about air travel and found that 27% of participants had already given up air travel due to a bad experience while 59% indicated that an improvement in the quality of disability assistance services may attract them to travel by air.

In addition to the statistical information presented above regarding the assistance-related experiences of people with disabilities, it is important to consider the current and projected estimates of disability in general and vision disability in particular when we think about air travel for individuals with disabilities. According to the most recent statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), about 61 million (1 in 4) adults in the United States live with a disability. Out of the 61 million, 4.6% or 2.8 million have a vision disability (Fast facts of common eye disorders, 2020). Furthermore, with the youngest of the baby boomers hitting 65 by 2029, the number of people with vision impairment or blindness in the United States is expected to double to more than 8 million by 2050, according to projections based on the most recent census data and from studies funded by the National Eye Institute, part of the National Institutes of Health (National Institutes of Health, 2016, para. 1).

It is these compelling statistics and the inherent communication challenges related to soliciting and receiving assistance for vision impaired air travelers that form the basic premise for this study. Above all, the study is driven on the foundations of the US and international legislation (e.g. Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, Air Carrier Access Act of 1986, and The United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities) that champion the fact that people with disabilities should have the same rights and quality of life, including the right to travel, as those without disabilities. Finally, the study concurs with the ideas of Chang and Chen (2012) who state that air travel for the disabled should be studied not just from a social justice perspective but also because reduced mobility is something that can affect almost every single individual in the long or short run.

Study Motivation

The motivation for this study stems from my own experiences as a person who has a vision disability. I will share two incidents – one that served as a motivation for this study and the other that bolstered my belief that this is an important research project to undertake. The first time I ever traveled independently was for an international trip from India to United States. I had requested assistance. Back then, in 2011, the only form of assistance offered in India was wheelchair assistance regardless of whether you can walk or not. If you are asking for disability assistance, that is what you got. I had mixed feelings, being both excited and scared at the same time. While my excitement was to study in the United States, my fear was to ensure that I got there safely first. As I sat in the wheelchair for first time, bidding teary farewells to my parents, I began to realize the contradiction of being independent by virtue of being completely dependent on this tall and eerily quiet person behind me pushing the wheelchair. It was hard to tell whether he was just too focused on his work or just did not like the idea of talking. Being wheeled through the long aisles with no conversations and no visuals was scary. Because it was my first time, I did not know what the norms were in terms of talking to assistants. So, I did not strike up a conversation either, thinking that I may distract him from his job. However, at a certain check-point, another assistant took over and the first assistant walked away without saying anything. To my surprise, even before I could feel my wheelchair in motion again, the new assistant started a conversation with me. He told me our current location and where we were headed. I felt a sudden burst of enthusiasm. Traveling suddenly felt fun! I felt as if I was just transformed from a piece of furniture to an actual human being. This was probably the most defining moment for me regarding

the significance of communication in receiving travel assistance as a vision-disabled traveler.

The second incident happened just a few months before the publication of this manuscript, when I was returning back to the United States from India. It was my turn next in-line to interact with the immigration officer who provides the final approval before one can board the plane to another country. The officer had anything but relevant questions regarding my reasons for travel to US. All the questions were indirectly posted to my spouse who is sighted, but exclusively related to my disability. Interspersed with heavy expressions of pity and awe, the questions ranged from how much could I see, to whether I could hear. I was consoled more than once with statements about being better off than those who had both hearing impairment and blindness as he apparently had another traveler a few days previously who was deaf and blind. To fully realize his satisfaction and amusement, he engaged another immigration officer sitting next to him in the conversation by repeating our responses back to the other agent — openly discussing my blindness while delaying other travelers waiting patiently behind us. Much to our exasperation, we had to put up with it because we did not have any power in the situation. No matter how offensive it was, I was not able to muster the courage to confront him because my future depended on a single passport stamp that would determine whether I would remain in India or return to the United States. Until that moment, I had never before felt so powerless and so infuriated at the same time. Clearly then, this work is informed by my own experiences as a traveler with a visual disability and the challenges this status engenders.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Laws and Regulations on Air Transportation for Individuals with Disabilities

Americans with Disabilities Act. Two main laws govern the rights for air travelers with disabilities and outline the responsibilities of airports and airlines in the United States. The first law is the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The ADA is civil rights legislation which was signed into law on July 26, 1990. The purpose of the law is to make sure that people with disabilities have the same rights and opportunities as everyone else. The ADA defines “disability” as “a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment” (Introduction to ADA, n.d., para. 2). The ADA gives civil rights protections to individuals with disabilities similar to those provided to individuals on the basis of race, color, sex, national origin, age, and religion. Divided into five titles, the ADA guarantees equal opportunity for individuals with disabilities in public accommodations, employment, transportation, state and local government services, and telecommunications. In 2008, the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (ADAAA) was signed into law and became effective on January 1, 2009. The ADAAA was passed in response to prior Supreme Court decisions that adopted a rather narrow and problematic definition of disability. The ADAAA broadened the interpretations of what constitutes a disability and required courts to focus on whether an entity has discriminated rather than on whether an individual’s impairment fits in the technical definition of disability set forth by the ADA.

While the ADA covers all forms of ground transportation offered by state and local governments, there are only a few aspects of air transportation covered under this law. In air transport, the ADA only covers U.S. airports and terminals. It requires that both, privately and publicly operated airports must be usable and accessible to travelers with disabilities. This includes accessible bathrooms, relief areas for service animals, and close-captioning on televisions. Under Title III, ADA holds air carriers responsible for ensuring the accessibility of all airport facilities including transportation systems, like airport shuttles, within terminals and between the terminal and other destinations that are owned, leased, or controlled by the air carrier. The ADA also covers terminal areas located in foreign airports that serve flights beginning or ending in the United States. The law requires equal access for travelers with disabilities in these areas through a variety or combination of several means including but not limited to assistance of personnel, auxiliary aids, equipment, and facility accessibility.

Air Carrier Access Act. The second law that specifically and more comprehensively covers the air transportation rights of individuals with disabilities is the Air Carrier Access Act (ACAA). ACAA was passed by Congress in 1986 with the primary intention of addressing the variability in accommodations allowed by airlines in absence of any standards and overarching governing law at the time. ACAA prohibits discrimination in air transportation by domestic and foreign air carriers against qualified individuals with physical or mental impairments. ACAA addresses a wide range of issues including boarding assistance and certain accessibility features in newly built aircraft and new or altered airport facilities. The Department of Transportation has a rule, Title 14 C.F.R. Part 382 – Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Disability in Air Travel, defining the

rights of passengers and the obligations of airlines under this law. This rule applies to all flights operated by U.S. airlines, and flights to or from the United States operated by foreign airlines.

Non-discrimination on the Basis of Disability in Air Travel (Title 14 C.F.R. Part 382). This rule comprises of a total of eleven sections – subpart A through subpart K – and covers all aspects of travelling by air with a disability.

Subpart A (General Provisions) has six sections that cover basic information about the provisions under the rule including the purpose of the rule, definitions of the terms used in the rule, air carriers that need to comply with the rule and general exemptions allowed to air carriers under the rule.

Subpart B (Nondiscrimination and Access to Services and Information) outlines responsibilities and requirements with regard to offering services and information to passengers with disabilities. The 13 sections under this subpart cover a wide range of topics beginning with specifics on what are the nondiscrimination requirements under the rule, to instructions on what air carriers can and cannot demand from passengers with disabilities (e.g., medical certificate, advance notice of travel, advance request of accommodations, etc.) and what air carriers can and can not deny passengers with disabilities (e.g., limiting the number of passengers with disabilities on a flight, restricting transportation to passengers with communicable diseases, leveraging special charges for providing specific accommodations, etc.).

Subpart C (Information for Passengers) has three sections that outline the accessibility requirements for air carriers with regard to flight-related information, reservation services and providing copies of 14 C.F.R. Part 382 to disabled travelers.

Subpart D (Accessibility of Airport Facilities) has four sections that cover requirements for air carriers with regard to accessibility of the different areas within the airport and beyond (e.g. terminals, jetways, within terminal transportation), responsibilities regarding access to information at each gate, ticketing area, and customer service area owned by the air carriers, and responsibilities with regard to security screenings of travelers with disabilities.

Subpart E (Accessibility of Aircraft) has six sections and covers predominantly responsibilities of air carriers with regard to onboard accessibility including movable aisle armrests, stowage of wheelchairs, accessibility of lavatories, and accessibility of in-flight entertainment systems for travelers who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Subpart F (Seating Accommodations) has four sections that specify the requirements for air carriers with regard to assigning seats to passengers with disabilities and personal care attendants or assistants traveling with them.

Subpart G (Boarding, Deplaning and Connecting Assistance) has eight sections and outlines the responsibilities of air carriers with regard to the specific areas and aspects of travel where assistance must be provided to passengers with disabilities (e.g., between gates, from vehicle drop off points adjacent to the airport through the entrance to the gates, from gates to other terminals, etc.), as well as pre-boarding requirements, assistance for enplaning and deplaning, and requirements regarding time limits for leaving passengers with disabilities unattended.

Subpart H (Services on Aircraft) has five sections covering topics such as the services that air carriers are required to provide to passengers with disabilities (e.g., stowage of carry-on items, assistance with meal services, effective communication to

provide equal access to information for vision and hearing impaired passengers, assistance to and from the lavatories, on-board safety briefings, etc.), and the services that air carriers are not required to provide to passengers with disabilities (e.g., assistance with eating, assistance within the lavatories, and provision of medical services). This section also outlines requirements for air carriers regarding the passengers' carriage of service animals (e.g., conditions for seating and documentation requirements for service animals).

Subpart I (Stowage of Wheelchairs, Other Mobility Aids and Other Assistive Devices) has seven sections and covers topics related to the carriage and stowage of mobility aids and assistive devices such as priority cabin stowage of wheelchairs, procedures for stowage in cargo compartments, procedures for disassembly of mobility devices, stowage of battery operated mobility devices, etc.

Subpart J (Training and Administrative Provisions) has three sections that covers air carriers' responsibilities for training their personnel including topics such as the nature and extent of training, time stipulations for completing training, and record keeping for the training provided.

The last subpart, Subpart K (Complaints and Enforcement Procedures) has five sections and covers topics including air carriers' responsibilities with regard to providing Complaint Resolutions Officers (CRO), roles and responsibilities of CROs, air carriers' obligations with regard to recording and reporting disability-related complaints, and procedures for filing complaints with DOT.

Some of the key provisions under Title 14 C.F.R. Part 382 that apply to vision impaired travelers include requiring commercial airlines to provide sighted guide

assistance to vision impaired travelers at airports, to allow vision impaired travelers to transport canes and other assistive devices in the passenger cabin close to their seat, and to provide vision impaired travelers timely access to the same information given to other passengers at the airport or the airline (e.g., flight delays or gate assignments). The regulation also prevents airlines from charging vision impaired travelers for making such accommodations. In addition, the regulations prohibit airlines from counting assistive devices (e.g., braille notetakers, book readers) in the carry-on allowance. Furthermore, the regulations require airlines to provide adequate training on ACAA to all public contact employees and third-party contractors. The regulations also cover accessibility of airport kiosks and websites with specific caveats and exemptions. Another part from Title 14 that is relevant given the scope of this study is Title 14 C.F.R. Part 121.

Operating Requirements: Domestic, FLAG and Supplemental Operations (Title 14 C.F.R. Part 121). The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) grants the authority to operate scheduled air service in the form of Federal Aviation Regulations. Air carriers are required to comply with a number of FAA requirements and safety standards based on their certification. The FAA uses the air carrier certification process to ensure that air carriers are able to design, document, implement, and audit safety critical processes that do two things: a) Comply with regulations and safety standards, and b) manage hazard-related risks in the operating systems and environment. Air carriers authorized to operate under a Part 121 certificate are generally large, U.S.-based airlines, many regional air carriers, and many large cargo operators. All airlines referred to by participants in this study are Part 121 certified carriers, which contains 30 Subparts and 16 appendices covering a variety of topics ranging from approval of routes, special

airworthiness requirements, training programs, crew member qualifications, flight time limitations, and flight operations.

FAA Reauthorization Act of 2018. On October 5, 2018, President Trump signed the FAA Reauthorization Act of 2018 (FAA Act). Section 439 of the FAA Act requires the Secretary of Transportation to establish an advisory committee to identify and assess barriers to accessible air travel, determine the extent to which DOT is addressing those barriers, recommend improvements, and advise the Secretary on implementing the Air Carrier Access Act (ACAA). Pursuant to this requirement of the FAA Act, on September 20, 2019, the Secretary announced the formation of the ACAA Advisory Committee and the appointment of 19 members to carry out the requirements of Section 439 of the FAA Reauthorization Act. According to the DOT website (Air Carrier Access Advisory Committee, 2020), the first meeting of the ACAA Advisory Committee was held on March 10 and 11, 2020, in Washington, D.C. and was designed to gather information on the barriers encountered by passengers with disabilities on a range of topics including ticketing, pre-flight seat assignments, access to bulkhead seating, stowage of assistive devices, and guide and wheelchair assistance at airports and on aircraft. There was also a discussion of airlines' disability training programs for employees and contractors who interact with the traveling public. An overview of the department's programs and activities related to the air travel of passengers with disabilities was provided at the meeting as well. In addition, the department consulted with the ACAA Advisory Committee to develop the "Airline Passenger with Disabilities Bill of Rights." The sizeable legislation designed to ensure access to and optimal experiences with air travel

for people with disabilities has corresponded with the development of an academic body of literature examining disability travel.

Emergence of Disability Travel Literature

The emergence of empirical studies on disability travel published in academic journals could be traced back to only the late 1990s and early 2000s. An exception is Smith's (1987) study in the disability tourism literature in which the researcher identified three categories of barriers to tourism for people with disabilities that undermined their sense of control and personal freedom. These barriers include intrinsic barriers that relate to disabled tourists' own levels of cognitive, psychological and physical function, environmental barriers that constitute physical elements of the built environment such as architectural elements and transportation, and interactive barriers which refer to the communication between the disabled tourists and their caregivers or service providers. Smith (1987) noted the need for greater empirical investigation of the tourism issues experienced by individuals with disabilities. Much of the published work on disability tourism that followed Smith's seminal study examined the overall tourist experience including aspects such as hotel stays, sightseeing difficulties, restaurant experiences, perceptions about tour guides and travel agents, and transport challenges. As a result, air travel has received only a fleeting consideration in the overall research focus of most of these studies. That is, the air travel experiences of disabled individuals appeared only as implicit references (Poria, Reichel & Brant, 2010). One exception was Abeyratne's (1995) study that examined the international and national regulatory measures relating to the carriage of elderly and disabled persons by air, which recommended proposals and guidelines for air carriers and airport administrations throughout the world.

A common theme underlying a majority of these early studies was to offer insights to travel agents and marketers about the constraints experienced by tourists with disabilities so that they could effectively tap into this growing market segment. Burnett and Baker (2001) argued that the mobility-disabled population may be a profitable market segment for the travel industry to target if their experiences can be examined based on the severity of their disability. The findings confirmed the researchers' argument that segmenting the disabled by level of severity is a valuable process and that those with more severe disabilities travel differently and for different reasons. In another study, Ray and Ryder (2003) found that word of mouth, internet and travel guides were the most preferred sources of gathering travel information for individuals with mobility impairments. They concluded that tourism marketers were not meeting the information needs of travelers with mobility disabilities and that they needed to do more to be able to successfully leverage this large and ever-growing consumer niche. McKercher, Yau, Packer & Lam (2003) also produced similar findings showing that the retail travel sector was regarded as an inhibitor to travel rather than a facilitator of it for mobility and sight impaired participants given the several attitudinal and structural barriers that exist for tourists with disabilities. Stumbo and Pegg (2005) discussed how the removal of the tourism constraints could enhance market share and outlined the benefits to be accrued to those in the travel and tourism trade who focus on providing equal opportunities for people with disabilities.

Other studies from the early 2000s framed disability travel from a social justice rather than a marketing perspective with the goal of identifying gaps in the services that impede in the equitable travel and tourism experience for individuals with disabilities.

Darcy (2002) argued that previous research on people with disabilities had not been framed from a disability perspective but from the perspectives of those studying people with disabilities. In an attempt to fill this gap, Darcy (2002) examined the lived experiences of people with disabilities to identify, quantify, and discuss the major areas of inequity. The study highlighted a number of oppressive social, political, and economic conditions that impacted tourists with high support needs relating to attendant issues, equipment, and accommodations. The researcher concluded that the social relations rather than their impairment constrained participants' tourism behavior. If people with disabilities are not provided at the minimum with accurate information that they can base their travel decisions on, then travel and tourism will remain a luxury experienced by only a few rather than the right of every individual.

Consistent with Darcy's (2002) remarks, Yau, McKercher, and Packer (2004) argued that the desire to travel is the same for people with or without a disability. However, to become travel active is not an automatic process for individuals with disabilities because they have comparatively more concerns to consider and negotiate than just purchasing a ticket or a package tour. In this regard, the researchers found five stages related to becoming travel active that included personal (acceptance and reintegration; reconnection), exploration for future traveling, analysis (searching for information), physical journey (compensation and compromise), and experimentation and reflection (experiencing different tastes of traveling). While some participants followed each stage sequentially, others tackled them in parallel and in certain cases went back and forth between stages.

Daniels, Rodgers, and Wiggins (2005) conducted a study to expand the understanding of the constraints tied to pleasure travel for people with disabilities and the negotiation strategies that they employed to manage these constraints. Using an interpretive content analysis method, the researchers analyzed travel accounts written by 23 people with disabilities from across the globe. Findings of their study concurred with Yau et al.'s (2004) earlier work suggesting that individuals with physical disabilities primarily face structural constraints followed by intrapersonal and interpersonal constraints that are ongoing and interactive rather than hierarchical. These constraints can arise unexpectedly at any given moment before or during the travel and participants negotiate them using rule-based, non-compensatory evaluation systems that result in yes or no elections.

While the studies reviewed above and several others published in this period focused on mostly the physical and attitudinal barriers experienced by tourists with disabilities, a few studies expanded the scholarship on disability tourism to highlight additional factors such as socio-economic barriers that restrict travel and holiday options for people with disabilities (e.g., Shaw & Coles, 2004). Overall, the early work on disability tourism predominantly investigated the range of constraints that people with disabilities who traveled or wished to travel experienced in managing their holiday plans. The next section reviews studies that specifically looked at the flight experiences of disabled tourists.

Flight Experiences of Individuals with Disabilities

Scholarly inquiries focusing exclusively on the air travel experiences of individuals with disabilities spawned in the last decade with an influx of research studies

conducted in different parts of the world including Taiwan (Chang & Chen, 2011, 2012), Australia (Darcy, 2012, 2016), Israel (Poria et al., 2010), Finland (Saari, 2015), Brazil (da Silva et al., 2017), Canada (Begen, Fung, Granot, Hall & Kluczny, 2018) and the United States (Lazar et al., 2010; Major & Hubbrad, 2019). While some studies explored specific aspects of flying with a disability, others focused on the flight experiences of disabled travelers in general, or specific disability types.

Darcy and Ravinder (2008) explored the impact of the growing low-cost airline model on the experiences of travelers with disabilities. The researchers argued that while the low-cost airline model becomes more accessible cost-wise, it poses a number of challenges for those with disabilities. For instance, the focus on lowering costs by allowing minimal baggage and maximizing aircraft space results in inconveniences/constraints for guide dog users and those carrying assistive aids and devices. Focusing on the flight experiences of a specific group of disabled travelers, Saari (2015) used a mixed-methods approach with wheelchair users and those who accompany them to understand the experiences of traveling with a mobility disability. Findings revealed that wheelchair users experience a range of difficulties particularly with regard to the use of aircraft lavatories. The study also found that communication issues between the staff and wheelchair users led to negative experiences. Overall, participants expressed that they did not feel that they had the same rights and possibilities in air travel as non-disabled passengers.

A similar study conducted by Davies and Christy (2017) in the United Kingdom explored the air travel experiences of individuals with mobility disabilities using a combination of qualitative approaches including narrative research, phenomenology, and

ethnography. The researchers found that wheelchair users have more negative experiences often characterized by feelings of nervousness and anxiety. They also experience physical and emotional distress due to a variety of reasons including communication barriers with staff, concerns about the proper stowage and timely delivery of wheelchairs, instances of being boarded last on planes, awkward involuntary movements due to turbulence and landing issues, and inaccessibility of lavatories.

Poria et al. (2010) used in-depth interviews to explore the flight experiences of wheelchair users, blind individuals, and people using crutches. The researchers found that participants were confronted with a variety of physical and social difficulties which resulted in humiliation and physical suffering particularly for the wheelchair users. A study by Darcy (2012) that examined the embodied nature of air travel experiences of those with hearing, vision, mobility, cognitive and other disabilities in Australia produced similar findings. Disabled participants' air travel experiences revealed that these embodied individuals became (dis)embodied at each stage of the air travel chain due to a variety of socially constructed travel constraints. The inequitable, inaccessible, undignified, and dependent practices resulted in heightened anxiety, increased helplessness and, in some cases, humiliation that they were not subjected to in their everyday lives. Darcy (2012) concluded that the air travel practices routinely contravened disability discrimination legislation.

In the context of United States, Major and Hubbard (2019) conducted a study similar to Darcy (2012). The researchers used quantitative and qualitative methods to document the challenges experienced by persons with disabilities. Key findings of the study suggested that the disability complaint rate has increased each year from 2010 to

2016; the disability complaint rate varies from airline to airline; and passengers with disabilities experience a wide range of difficulties including damage of wheelchairs and personnel training issues. The researchers concluded that the ADA and ACAA have not been able to meet their intended purpose of protecting equal rights to passengers with disabilities.

More recent studies have examined nuanced topics related to disability air travel such as investigating website inaccessibility of airlines vis-à-vis the DOT's rule prohibiting airlines to charge extra for booking tickets over the phone if their website is inaccessible to disabled travelers (Lazar et al., 2018), exploring flight attendants' perceptions of the in-flight needs of passengers with mobility impairments (Wang & Cole, 2014), examining air travel experiences of parents of children with disabilities (Davies & Christie, 2018), using virtual reality technology for training air travel skills to children on the autism spectrum (Miller, Wiederhold, Miller, & Wiederhold, 2020), exploring wayfinding strategies for older adults with cognitive and vision loss in air travel (Bosch & Gharaveis, 2017), analyzing international travel rights legislations for passengers with disabilities across 47 countries toward building a global policy (Budd & Ison, 2020), and examining perspectives on traveling with dementia from people with dementia, their travel companions, flight crews and security staff (O'Reilly, 2017)

Vision Disability, Flight Experiences & Assistance Services

The disability travel studies reviewed thus far highlights several gaps in the literature. First, there is relatively limited research that examines the air travel experiences of individuals with disabilities (Poria et al., 2010; Yates, 2007). Second, research on the air travel experiences of people with disabilities in the United States is

scant (Major & Hubbard, 2019). Most importantly, research studies that specifically examine the air travel experiences of individuals with disabilities predominantly focus on wheelchair users or a combination of participants with different kinds of disabilities (e.g. Darcy, 2012, Davies & Christy, 2017). Very few studies explore sensory impairments such as hearing and vision impairments (Small & Darcy, 2010; Small et al., 2012).

Poria, Reichel, Brandt, Buhalis & Darcy (2011) note the dearth of studies on the air travel experiences of blind individuals as “surprising” due to several reasons including the considerable size of the blind population, existence of legislation and regulations requiring organizations and companies to offer accessibility to individuals with disabilities, and travel being increasingly recognized as a social right and important factor in the quality of life and well-being of all human beings. Another reason for the disability research to remain at the margins of travel and tourism scholarship is the “tourist gaze” (Richards, Pritchard & Morgan, 2010, p. 1099). The researchers argue that tourism studies have found it difficult to look beyond the gaze and this could be attributed to the Aristotelian hierarchy of senses where sight, hearing and smell were classified as human senses whereas, touch and taste were regarded as animal senses. This classification has led to the occularcentric tourism scholarship (Richards et al., 2010). The person with a vision disability has to overcome the broadly held perception that because they cannot see, then the person cannot appreciate travel fully (Small et al., 2012). Many sighted people cannot even conceptualize the unsighted could travel. However, with an understanding of the other senses there are many elements of tourism that people who are blind or have vision impairment can experience and want to experience through the

ambience, sights and sounds, aromas and tactility offered by alternative and captivating destinations (McKercher & Darcy, 2018).

The travel needs of people with vision impairments are unique and need to be understood from the vantage point of the vision impaired travelers. Small et al (2012) investigated the holiday travel experiences of individuals with vision impairments and found that two of the most significant access enablers were information and wayfinding, which if developed appropriately can lead to quality tourism experiences. In the context of air travel, access to information becomes critical as time is of the essence especially in situations of connecting flights. Blind individuals appreciate accurate and immediate notifications of any changes in flight schedules and gate changes for a variety of reasons including their inability to read the electronic signs or to hear/understand messages relayed on the public announcements due to airport noise or local accents (Poria et al., 2011). In addition to these physical barriers, individuals with vision impairments may also experience sociopsychological barriers.

Yau et al. (2004) found that some participants with newly acquired vision impairments tended to disguise their disability in order to avoid confronting stereotypes held against people with disabilities, and that they disclosed their disability only in situations where assistance became critical (e.g., going through airports). Individuals with visual impairments who do not use the social signifiers of blindness such as a white cane or guide dog are often made to feel “a fraud” because they work against people’s expectations of how they should look and act (Richards et al., 2010, p. 1107). This in turn negatively impacts their self-efficacy. With regard to airport situations in particular, visually impaired participants in Richards et al’s (2010) study experienced negative

service situations where they were forced to be assisted in wheelchairs and were made to wait in dark places under the presumption that they could not see at all given they are visually impaired.

According to Yau et al. (2004) experience plays a crucial role for people with disabilities, including those with vision impairments in determining future interests in travel and tourism. While some disabled tourists and travelers in previous studies indicated that if they had a negative experience they would not travel with the same airline (Poria et al., 2010), others stated that they may never fly again (Chang & Chen, 2012; Yau et al., 2004), or that they would choose modes of transport where their independence and dignity could be maintained (Darcy, 2012). Thus, the value of quality assistance services was strongly emphasized by participants in almost all studies that investigated the experiences of disabled tourists in general, and vision impaired tourists in particular (Darcy, 2012; McKercher & Darcy, 2018; Poria et al., 2011; Richards et al., 2010; Yau et al., 2004).

Small et al. (2012) found in their study that while the ignorance of the public could be forgiven, the ignorance of the service providers was less excusable by vision impaired tourists. The researchers argued that whether travelling independently, within a group context, or with an attendant, it was clear that people with vision impairments had to be assertive and ask for help from others (including strangers) while traveling, and that this aspect of trust was likely to be a critical aspect of the tourist experiences of those with vision impairment than those with other disabilities. In the following section, the role of communication in assistance situations is discussed in greater detail.

Role of Communication in Interability Assistance Situations

Communication plays a central role in the lives of people with disabilities particularly when they meet with non-disabled strangers or new acquaintances (Braithwaite, 1987). The communication between people with and without disabilities referred to as Interability Communication (Fox & Giles, 1996) has received significant attention in the communication discipline. One of the most challenging interability communication situations for people with disabilities is managing assistance from people without disabilities (Braithwaite, 1987; Braithwaite & Eckstein, 2004; Soule & Roloff, 2000). In fact, Braithwaite and Labrecque (1994) noted that “helping is one of the most difficult challenges both disabled and non-disabled persons face” (p. 291) and can often lead to misinterpretations and misunderstandings.

Soule and Roloff (2000) offer a classification of assistance types – solicited, unsolicited, necessary, and unnecessary to illustrate how misinterpretations and misunderstandings could transpire between the disabled and non-disabled individuals. Compared to solicited assistance where the disabled individual remains in charge of what they need or want, Soule and Roloff (2000) argue that unsolicited assistance can cause many problems in interability communication situations because the non-disabled person makes judgements about the abilities of a disabled individual and unilaterally decides what the disabled individual can or cannot do. This in turn may embolden disabled individuals’ self-perceptions of the non-disabled individuals’ actions of unsolicited assistance as patronizing, condescending, and compensating.

Furthermore, unnecessary assistance involves giving people with disabilities help with a task that they could have done by themselves, whereas necessary assistance refers

to giving someone help with an action that he or she could not have performed alone. Soule and Roloff (2000) argue that the potential negative effects of unsolicited assistance on persons with disabilities may be exacerbated if the assistance given was unnecessary. Receiving unsolicited unnecessary assistance prompts greater tension in the recipient, less liking for the helper, and less indebtedness toward the helper than does receiving needed assistance.

Additionally, unsolicited, unnecessary assistance can cause a person with a disability to feel embarrassed, inadequate, dependent, or even angry (Braithwaite, 1987), because it may appear that a non-disabled individual presumed that the person with a disability was dependent and in need of help. However, if the help given was necessary, a person with a disability may be less likely to experience these negative feelings because they would not have been able to perform an action without this help, which could engender feelings of gratitude or charity toward a helper. Indeed, some individuals with disabilities may even appreciate unsolicited, necessary help because they could avoid the burden and potential embarrassment of having to ask for assistance (Braithwaite, 1987).

Wang, Walker, Pietri and Ashbum-Nardo (2019) investigated the consequences of confronting unsolicited, inappropriate offers of assistance for people with visible disabilities. Their findings indicated that when confronting patronizing help, blind individuals might experience a greater backlash than individuals who used wheelchairs, and that nondisabled individuals perceived patronizing help as more appropriate when the target was blind versus using a wheelchair. The researchers presented one possible explanation for their findings. That is, participants may have regarded blind individuals as more in need of help than those who use wheelchairs, especially in the specific context

of independent travel. Bhagchandani (2014) found negative turning points in marital relationships between sighted and vision impaired partners who experienced confusions as they dealt with arguments of what constitutes offering and receiving necessary assistance

Communication skills are crucial for individuals with vision disabilities for engaging in effective interaction with sighted people (Erin, Dignan & Brown, 1991). This involves both making sense of a world that is visually sensible to individuals with sight and developing strategies that can enhance social behaviors, including such routine needs as seeking assistance (Erin et al., 1991). There are no established standards that determine appropriate social skills for people who are blind or visually impaired, making them dependent on skills used by individuals with sight (Smith & Kandath, 2000). In this regard, people who are blind or visually impaired can be viewed as a cultural group in that their cultural practices, mostly communicative, are a functional and situational adaptation of their blindness vis-à-vis the communication skills commonly used and accepted by the sighted world (Smith & Kandath, 2000).

While the most prevalent interpretations of the word culture still relate to nationality and diaspora, it has evolved over the years in the fields of intercultural and cross-cultural communication to include different groups of people as a way of recognizing their unique differences. The work of Orbe (1998) is one such example that has offered a perspective that recognizes and helps us understand the diversity of experiences among different groups of people. Orbe (1998) refers to these groups as “co-cultures” to avoid the negative or inferior connotations that are generally linked to commonly used terms such as “subordinates,” “subcultures,” or “minority” (p. 1). Within

the United States several domestic co-cultures exist on the basis of age, class, ethnicity, religion, abilities, affection or sexual orientation, and other unifying elements. The following section discusses Co-cultural theory developed by Orbe (1998) that also serves as the theoretical framework for this research.

Co-cultural Theory

Theoretical Underpinnings. Co-cultural theory lends insights into the ways in which persons who are traditionally marginalized in dominant societal structures communicate in their everyday lives. The theory is grounded in the work of feminist scholars, namely, muted-group theory (Kramarae, 1981) and standpoint theory (Smith, 1987). Grounded in an epistemological stance that seeks to empower those traditionally marginalized on the fringe of dominant societal structures, these theories demonstrate a valuable framework for researching the communicative lived experiences of Co-cultural group members (Orbe, 1998). Muted group theory was originally established in the anthropology literature (S. Ardener, 1975; E. Ardener, 1978), and was later adopted by communication scholars to examine the experiences of women (Kramarae, 1981) and African-American men (Orbe, 1994b).

The basic tenet of the muted group theory is that in every society a social hierarchy exists that privileges those at the top of the social hierarchy who are also referred to as dominant group members (S. Ardener, 1975; E. Ardener, 1978). These dominant groups, consciously or unconsciously, formulate the communication systems for the society and over time the structures of this system reify as the appropriate communicative systems for both the dominant groups as well as those at the bottom of the social hierarchy – the nondominant group members (Ardener, 1975). While the

communication systems thus reified reflect the worldviews of the dominant group members, it largely remains non-representative of the lived experiences of the non-dominant group members. The concept of “mutedness” illustrates the consequences for others when dominant communication structures maintain perceptual boundaries on the basis of their own perception of reality; in essence, these structures “block the power of actualization of the other” (Kramarae, 1981, p. 25).

Standpoint theory (Harding, 1987, 1991; Hartsock, 1983; Smith, 1987) concentrates on the unique experiences and societal positioning of individuals that serve as a vantage point from which they interact with themselves and the world. The theory recognizes the value of individuals’ field of experience and its impact on understanding their perceptions of their daily communication experiences. Orbe (1998) highlights the key tenets of Standpoint Theory as it contributes to Co-cultural theory. First, research should begin on the individual’s concrete lived experiences and should recognize the diverse range of standpoints among and within different Co-cultural groups by including the experiences of marginalized group members in the inquiry process. Second, Orbe (1998) states the majority of scholarship at the time focused on presenting only the dominant perspective. Standpoint theory helps to expand our understanding of the worldviews of marginalized group members which are often in contrast to the worldviews of the dominant group members. Thus, standpoint theory helps to embrace alternate understandings of the world. Third, Standpoint Theory contends that the value of these Co-cultural perspectives is crucial, since marginalized group members have the ability to see dominant societal structures from the positioning of an “outsider-within” perspective. In other words, marginalized group members who gain access into dominant

structures have the unique opportunity to perceive the settings from a near *and* obscure vantage point.

Co-cultural theory derives from the lived experiences of a variety of non-dominant or Co-cultural groups, including people of color, women, persons with disabilities, gays/lesbians/bisexuals, and those from a lower socioeconomic background. Five epistemological assumptions undergird Co-cultural theory (Orbe, 1998), each of which reflects its theoretical foundation. First, a hierarchy exists in each society that gives privilege to certain groups of people, referred to as dominant groups. Common dominant groups in the United States include men, European Americans, heterosexuals, the able-bodied/non-disabled individuals, and the middle and upper classes. Second, dominant group members, on the basis of these varying levels of privilege, occupy positions of power that they use to create and maintain communication systems that reflect, reinforce, and promote their field of experience. Third, dominant communication structures, directly and indirectly, impede the progress of those persons whose lived experiences are not reflected in the public communicative systems. Fourth, Co-cultural group members' experiences will vary; however, they will also share a similar societal position that renders them marginalized and underrepresented within dominant societal structures. Fifth and finally, Co-cultural group members strategically adopt certain communication behaviors to negotiate oppressive dominant structures. These assumptions are drawn from the work of muted-group theory as well as from the standpoint of persons whose societal existence is typically marginalized by dominant public structures.

Theoretical Framework. The focus of the early stages of research conducted by Orbe (1996) was to identify specific communication practices that Co-cultural group members used in their interactions with dominant group members. A total of 26 communication practices were identified (Appendix A). The initial purpose for identifying and explicating these practices was not necessarily to advance a definitive collection of mutually exclusive communication behaviors. The design, instead, was to give voice to various ways in which Co-cultural group members negotiated larger dominant structures (Orbe, 1998). Once this set of 26 practices were identified, the Co-cultural communication scholarship shifted its focus to understanding how Co-cultural group members come to select certain communication practices over others. Such examination led to the development of the Co-cultural communication model. Central to the Co-cultural communication model is the explication of six interrelated communication factors that directly influence the process by which Co-cultural group members communicate within dominant societal structures.

The first factor that influences the communication practices Co-cultural group members engage in is the preferred outcome. Orbe (1998) states that Co-cultural group members typically (consciously or unconsciously) consider how their communicative behavior affects their immediate and ultimate relationship with dominant group members. In this regard, each person asks herself or himself the following question, "What communication behavior will lead to the effect that I desire?" (Orbe, 1998, p.89). Co-cultural group members have three primary interactional outcomes that include assimilation, accommodation, and separation. Assimilation involves attempts to eliminate cultural differences, and the loss of any distinctive characteristics, to fit in with the

dominant society. To achieve the preferred outcome of accommodation, attempts to eliminate cultural differences or mute the voices associated with Co-cultural groups are often resisted so that life experiences of each Co-cultural group are incorporated in the dominant structures. The preferred outcome of separation rejects the notion of forming a common bond with dominant group members and other Co-cultural groups. Instead, they seek to create and maintain separate-group identities outside the dominant structures.

The second interrelated factor in the model is field of experience. Field of experience is the sum of one's lived experiences. Orbe (1998) explains that through a lifelong series of experiences, Co-cultural group members learn how to use a variety of tactics while also learning the consequences of using certain practices in different situations. It is through the varied incidents within their field of experience, Co-cultural group members learn to recognize what constitutes appropriate and effective communication with dominant group members.

Abilities is the third factor that influences Co-cultural group members' choices of communication practices that they use in interacting with dominant group members. Orbe (1998) asserts that one's ability to engage in each practice is something that should not be assumed. The ability to use a Co-cultural communicative practice is directly related to specific personal characteristics and situational circumstances.

The situational context serves as the fourth interrelated factor in the Co-cultural communication model. The dynamics of power relations typically shift somewhat from situation to situation and this modification is reflected in which Co-cultural communicative practices are employed. Different situational factors such as the communication setting, the individuals present during the communication, and the

particular circumstances that facilitate the interaction all influence the choice of practices Co-cultural group members would adopt.

A fifth factor that is brought into consideration in the ongoing process of selecting, employing, and evaluating the use of different communication practices is the perceived costs and rewards associated with each communication practice. Co-cultural group members anticipate the perceived costs and rewards for any given communication practice differently depending upon the specific situational context, their preferred outcome, and their overall field of experience.

Communication approach is the sixth and the final factor in the Co-cultural communication model that is influential in the process in which Co-cultural group members come to select, employ, and evaluate communication practices. The communication approach people select depends on the communication behaviors that can be enacted by Co-cultural group members, and these behaviors fall along a continuum of nonassertive, assertive, and aggressive. A *nonassertive* communication approach is characterized as an inhibited and nonconfrontational behavior in which priority is given to others' needs. An *assertive* communication approach encompasses self-enhancing, expressive communication that considers the needs of self and others. The *aggressive* communication approach is self-promoting and controlling and focuses on self needs. No single approach is most (or always) effective; much depends on how the person negotiates the other factors.

Furthermore, each communication approach (i.e., nonassertive, assertive, and aggressive) is motivated by a specific preferred outcome (i.e., assimilation, accommodation, or separation) and the approach and outcome result in one of nine

communication orientations influenced by the field of experience, perceived costs and rewards, abilities, and situational context (Appendix A). These nine communication orientations include nonassertive assimilation, assertive assimilation, aggressive assimilation, nonassertive accommodation, assertive accommodation, aggressive accommodation, nonassertive separation, assertive separation, and aggressive separation. Co-cultural group members can assume one or more of these communication orientations during their everyday interactions with family, friends, co-workers, or strangers. Orbe (1998) summarizes the Co-cultural communication model in the following way:

Situated within a particular field of experience that governs their perceptions of the costs and rewards associated with as well as their ability to engage in various communicative practices, Co-cultural group members will adopt communication orientations-based on their preferred outcomes and communication approaches-to fit the circumstances of specific situations. Orbe, 1998, p. 13)

Theoretical Applications. The Co-cultural theoretical framework has been used to examine a diverse range of topics with different Co-cultural groups. A majority of studies that utilize Co-cultural theoretical framework focus on workplace settings (Bridgewater & Buzzanell 2010; Camara, Katznelson, Hildebrandt-Sterling & Parker, 2012; Herakova, 2012; Zirulnik & Orbe, 2019) and academic settings (Glenn & Johnson, 2012; Orbe & Groscurth, 2004; Urban & Orbe, 2007). Other studies focus on the overall experiences of specific Co-cultural groups such as Japan-residing Koreans (Matsunaga & Toregoe, 2008), monosexuals (Meyer, 2019), multicultural families in Korea (Han & Price, 2018), Chinese-American female adoptees (Blair & Liu,2019), and wives of Chinese gay men (Tang, Meadows & Li, 2020).

Very few studies so far have exclusively examined the experiences of individuals with disabilities as a Co-cultural group. Cohen and Avanzino (2010) examined how individuals with disabilities manage able-bodied privilege and negotiate assimilation in organizations. In their study that examined how individuals respond to acts of discrimination. Camara and Orbe (2010) included people with disabilities as one of the Co-cultural groups along with other groups in their sample. Badini & Anderson (2005) conducted a study guided by standpoint and Co-cultural theory to examine how girls with physical disabilities, as members of two nondominant groups (female and disabled), participate in active recreation activities as well as how they perceive their status as female participants with disabilities.

With regard to specific type of disabilities, the literature is scant and vision disability is no exception. Makkawy (2016) is the only exception that examined the communication strategies used by vision impaired employees to manage access to assistive technologies in the workplace using a Co-cultural theoretical lens. In addition, Co-cultural theory has not been applied in the air transportation context as it relates to travelers with disabilities given the inequitable treatment they commonly experience.

Situating those with disabilities as a Co-cultural group, subjected to operating in a world dictated by dominant groups, brings into focus the challenges these travelers face routinely. That is, the travel industry generally and air travel in particular provide a context that sharpens the contrasts between the dominant group and the disability Co-cultural group. Reflecting upon this reality leads to a set of research questions posed in the next section.

Research Questions

It is noteworthy that despite the training that airport workers are required to complete to do their jobs effectively under the regulations set forth by title 14 C.F.R. Part 382, most studies report that travelers with physical disabilities have repeatedly expressed their dissatisfaction with the assistance that they received from airport staff (Chang & Chen, 2011; Darcy, 2012), including frequent communication issues (Major & Hubbard, 2019; Saari, 2015). To shed further light on the specific needs of travelers with vision disabilities, which remains an underexplored area in the field, the following research question is posed:

RQ1: What are the experiences of individuals with vision disabilities who use disability-assistance services for air travel?

The inherent power structures in interability communication favor people without disabilities with a higher social status than people with disabilities (Fox et al., 2000). This higher status empowers people without disabilities to interpret communication behaviors of people with disabilities on their own terms which may lead to misinterpretations and stereotyping (Fox et al., 2000). Drawing from the fundamental tenets of Co-cultural theory, interability communication literature, and travel experiences of individuals with physical disabilities, leads to the conclusion that individuals with visual disabilities can be viewed as one Co-cultural group who constantly need to negotiate with their sighted counterparts who comprise the dominant group that shape assistance situations. Fox et al.'s (2000) example of an interability communication situation further illustrates this point:

One example would be the statement “please don't do that; it is better if I do it myself”. Although this may be an attempt by a person with a disability to assert independence, the person without a disability can interpret this statement as a reflection of bitterness and embarrassment, thus sustaining the latter’s negative stereotypes. (Fox et al., 2000, p. 199)

In the air travel context, such communicative awkwardness and ambiguity can negatively impact interactions between staff and travelers with vision disabilities and may complicate the situation, particularly for the traveler whose safe and timely travel significantly depends on the assistance provided by staff. It will be insightful to examine the communicative choices and approaches these individuals adopt to achieve their preferred travel-related outcomes while negotiating their identities as a blind traveler. The following research question was posed to explore this further:

RQ2: What Co-cultural communication practices and orientations do travelers with vision disabilities employ when navigating their air travel?

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN

Chapter Overview

I open this chapter by introducing the research methodology used for this study and offer justifications for why I think it is suitable for examining the research topic. I then offer my positionality as a researcher in the study. I continue the chapter by outlining the steps taken to obtain Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for the study and to select and recruit the study sample. I follow this by explicating procedures for data analysis. I conclude this chapter by offering a discussion on the steps taken to ensure validity and reliability of findings.

Research Methodology

I used the qualitative research methodology to answer the research questions previously presented. Qualitative research methodology enables researchers to offer rich descriptions of the scene and to gain an in-depth understanding of the stories people use to narrate their lives (Tracy, 2020). Furthermore, qualitative methodology helps in locating the meanings people place on the events, processes, and structures of their lives and for connecting these meanings to the social world around them (Miles & Huberman, 1994). However, knowing the methodology alone is not sufficient. One needs to know the different theoretical traditions, or else it is like learning or playing a musical instrument without knowing anything about the different genres and performance styles of music (Lindloff & Taylor, 2017, p.51). Thus, some form of an organizing scheme is needed that makes sense of different theories in relation to each other (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011). This organizing scheme is referred to as a theoretical tradition.

Orbe (1998) framed Co-cultural theory within the Phenomenological tradition. Phenomenology represents a philosophy and human science research method that focuses on the conscious experience of a person relating to the lived world that they inhabit while being sensitive to the uniqueness of the person (Lanigan, 1979; Nelson, 1989; Orbe, 1998; Van Manen, 1990). I argue that the qualitative methodology with the phenomenological approach is suitable for the purposes of this research study as it will offer the opportunity to gain a rich, descriptive, and in-depth understanding of lived travel experiences of blind co-researchers as those experiences get stated and reflected upon in their own words.

Three main steps are outlined for conducting a phenomenological inquiry – description, reduction, and interpretation (Lanigan, 1979; Nelson 1989; Orbe, 1998a). Orbe (1998) states that before entering the description stage, one must give consciousness to their subjective position with relation to the phenomenon being examined. In the paragraphs that follow, I first describe my positionality as a researcher, before continuing with a detailed explanation of how I applied the three steps of phenomenological inquiry in this study.

Researcher's Positionality and Vantage Point

Given the inherent interpretive nature of qualitative research in which the researcher interprets or makes sense of the meaning acquired during data collection, the quality of qualitative research has received significant attention and has sparked continued debate in the academic community. Tracy (2020) offers a comparison between qualitative and quantitative research methods. She explains that in quantitative research, the research instrument is separate from the researcher. The researcher is merely

controlling the research instrument to record observations. However, this is not the case in qualitative research. The qualitative researcher is the instrument, and any observations that are made are through the lens of the researcher's mind and body. A crucial first step, therefore, identified in the qualitative research literature particularly with regard to ensuring the quality of phenomenological research studies, is the researcher's self-assessment of their own background, preconceived notions, biases, and subjectivity. This process of self assessment is often referred to as self-reflexivity (Orbe, 2000; Lindloff & Taylor, 2011)

Several different options can be used by researchers to incorporate self-reflexivity in their research study that include offering a section that describes the researcher's role, providing an epilogue, using interpretive commentary throughout the discussion of the findings, or bracketing themselves out by providing a description of their personal experiences (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Creswell and Miller (2000) stress the importance of researchers' acknowledgement and description of their entering beliefs and biases early in the research process to allow readers to understand their positions, and then to bracket or suspend those researcher biases as the study proceeds.

I enter this research study with my own set of values, beliefs, preconceived notions, and background. I am a woman of color with a vision disability. I am from India and I have been living in the United States for about 10 years now. The intersectionality of my identity positions me in a unique academic space to conduct this research study. As someone who has lost about 90% of my vision over time from a degenerative, genetic eye condition, I have found myself in a constant flux of exploring different ways to adjust to my vision loss and the ways in which I carry out my personal and academic tasks. My

needs for assistance change across situations, contexts, physical spaces, and the people around me whose knowledge and exposure to blindness vary immensely. These factors along with my identity as a blind woman of color adds to the nuances of my communication style and behavior with others in any given situation. One of these situations includes my own unique experiences as a blind traveler, both, in India and the United States.

I have had a variety of air travel experiences ranging from a few exceptional disability assistance service encounters to several discriminatory experiences. In the initial years of my diagnosis as a teenager, I did not have the working vocabulary or cognitive framework to make sense of negative experiences. I tended to internalize discrimination and view it as stemming from my own physical limitations. In doing so, I would blame myself for being blind, and this resulted in lower levels of self-esteem and self-confidence. Although I used to feel overly grateful when receiving assistance even when it was not needed, I remember having a vague sense of discomfort when people used to over-assist me or sympathize with me over my disability. In retrospect, I can see my ideologies at that time concurred with the medical model of disability where the problem lies within the individual and needs to be fixed so that one can integrate into the normative world.

As I grew older and became more comfortable with my prognosis and understood my rights as an individual with a disability, I found myself traversing through a shift in mindset toward the social model of disability. The social model views disability not in terms of the individual's impairment but in terms of environmental, social, and attitudinal barriers that impede their inclusion and progress in different areas of life (Barnes, 2003;

Oliver, 1996). Consistent with the social model, I now believe that most of the times when I feel disabled, it is due to the societal barriers that do not offer a level-playing field for me to participate fully as a productive individual. I also have come to realize my preference for people-first language that situates my blindness as one of several other features of me as an individual rather than as the primary defining characteristic. This means that I like to refer to myself “as a person with a vision disability” or “a person who is blind.” Therefore, all references that I make to myself throughout this dissertation use the people-first language. However, as research studies suggest, the views of people with disabilities on language varies from person to person and group to group. For example, the deaf and the autistic communities generally prefer identity first language (Jones, 2002; Bury, Jellett, Spoor & Hedley, 2020). This means that they like to call themselves “Autistic” or “Autistic person” instead of “person with autism.” In this dissertation, I have used, both, people-first, and identity-first language to refer to the co-researchers to honor both ideological choices.

In summary, I do believe that my background, my experiences with my disability, and my perceptions about my ascribed and avowed identities together have molded my perspectives about living with a disability. My experiences have also, in large part, served as the impetus for undertaking this research project. While it may appear on the surface that my own experiences as someone with a vision disability makes me more equipped and prepared to study this topic, I believe that this is not completely true. A researcher with the same disability as his or her subjects does not automatically gain an emic perspective into the lives of the subjects (Sheldon, 2014). Although it is impossible for a researcher to fully separate herself or himself from the study, I will strive to unlearn my

own experiences as an individual with a disability so that I can create a space where I can focus on the experiences of the blind travelers that I am studying. This is referred to as bracketing in the phenomenological data analysis process (Husserl, 2006).

My goal, therefore, for this dissertation study was to enhance my understandings and broaden my perspectives of the complexities of traveling with a vision disability through the lived experiences of co-researchers. I followed the approach of phenomenologists (Husserl 1962; Merleau-Ponty 1962; Lanigan 1979) who have worked to become a medium for the voice of their co-researchers without necessarily manipulating, altering, or reshaping the life experiences of those individuals (Gluck & Patai 1991). In doing so, I aimed to listen to the stories of the co-researchers and remained attentive at all times, even when I felt I could relate to and was familiar with those stories.

My goal was to make concerted efforts to actively ask questions instead of assuming the answers from my own similar experiences. More importantly, through this research project, I aimed to offer a platform for blind individuals to make sense of their own travel experiences vis-à-vis their own identities and worldviews. This interview approach was intended to incorporate catalytic validity in that the idea was to empower co-researchers to advocate for themselves and participate in transforming their own lives towards a more just and equitable world. Creating an opportunity in which participants may be able to grow through the thoughtful assessment of their experiences is referred to as catalytic validity (Lather, 1986).

Protection of Human Subjects

A quality study must ensure the protection of participants as human subjects before data collection can begin (Creswell, 2007). An Institutional Review Board (IRB) review functions usefully as a critical reading of a study's ethical character (Lindloff & Taylor, 2017). The major purposes of an IRB review are to ensure that the rights of human subjects are properly respected and that a study's procedures or outcomes will not place them at undue physical, psychological, social, or economic risk. Thus, for ensuring the protection of the participants in my study, I submitted my research application to IRB at Arizona State University. This application included my approved rationale for the study, timeline, description of the research design and procedures, and drafts of the recruitment letters, consent forms, and interview guide (Appendix B). This step offered me the opportunity to carefully assess the ethical implications of my study, and to plan research procedures and practices that maximize the confidentiality of my participants (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Tracy, 2010).

Data Collection

Sampling. As adopted by several other recent phenomenological studies, participants in this study are referred to as "co-researchers." Orbe (1998) explains that compared to commonly used terminologies such as "participants", "subjects" or "interviewees", "co-researchers" reflect the interactive role that these individuals "play in shaping research outcomes" (p. 13). Co-researchers in this study were recruited using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques. As an alternative to random sampling, qualitative researchers usually engage in purposeful (or purposive) sampling. That is, they make informed judgments about what actions to observe, whom to

interview, or what artifacts to describe—judgments that are based largely on the logic of information-rich cases (Patton, 1990).

Thus, using the snowball technique, also known as the chain-referral technique (Lindloff & Taylor, 2017), I began reaching out to a few individuals in my own network who I believed fit the study criteria. I then asked these people to make referrals to friends, colleagues, or relatives whom they thought possessed the characteristics of interest under examination (Lindloff & Taylor, 2017). I also sent out recruitment letters to various non-profit organizations in the United States that work for the empowerment of individuals who are blind or vision impaired to recruit co-researchers.

One of the many steps in designing a qualitative study is to determine the boundaries and define the different aspects of the subjects that can be studied—keeping in mind the researcher’s time and budget, possible participants relevance to the research questions, and their potential to offer rich illustrations of the specific research topic (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The inclusion criteria for co-researchers to participate in this study were (a) be 18 years or older, (b) have a vision disability, and c) travel by commercial aircraft without a caregiver or personal attendant at least once a year. For the purpose of this study, the definition of vision disability is drawn from a combination of its medical and functional definitions. Thus, vision disability is defined by any of the following: (a) having visual acuity of 20/200 or lower, (b) having a field of view no greater than 20 degrees in the better eye, or (c) any individual who self-identifies as having a severe form of vision impairment that necessitates the request of disability assistance services during their air travel. “Vision impairment” is often regarded as an umbrella term that consists of several categories and terminologies including partially

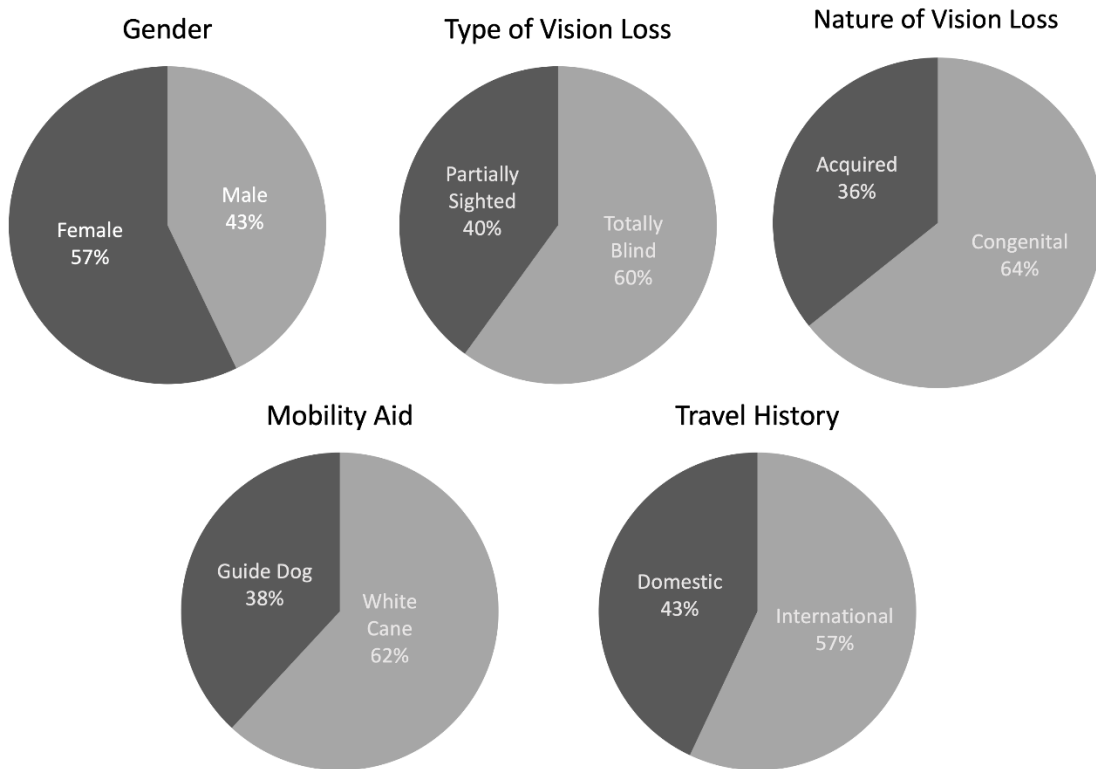
sighted, low vision, legally blind, and totally blind. For the purposes of this study, the words “blind” and “vision impaired” are used interchangeably to represent all co-researchers’ degree of vision impairments.

Sample demographics. A total of 47 co-researchers were recruited for this study. However, due to technological issues with audio recordings and very limited information shared by some co-researchers, five interviews were excluded from the final analysis. Hence, a total of 42 ($N = 42$) co-researchers were included in this study (Figure 1). Of the 42 co-researchers 23 were female (55%), 18 were male (43%), and one did not report about gender. Co-researchers’ age ranged from 21 to 76 years ($M = 46.75$; $SD = 8.22$). Most regions of the United States (i.e., East, and West coasts, South, Midwest, and Rocky Mountain) were represented with participants drawn from 11 states.

With regard to the degree of vision impairment, 60% of co-researchers were completely blind ($n = 25$) with some having light perception, and the remaining 40% were partially sighted ($n = 17$). In addition, 64% of co-researchers had congenital eye conditions/blindness ($n = 27$), whereas the remaining 36% had acquired the vision impairment or blindness ($N = 15$) due to a variety of causes including, but not limited to degenerative eye conditions, road accidents, and side effects of certain medications/surgical procedures. Furthermore, of the 42 co-researchers, 62% ($n = 26$) used a white cane while traveling whereas the remaining 38% ($n = 16$) were guide dog users. 57% ($n = 24$) of co-researchers traveled internationally on a regular basis, while the remaining 43% ($n = 18$) had never traveled internationally. The average number of round trips that co-researchers took ranged from 1 to 150 in a year with most individuals indicating traveling 2-3 times a year on an average.

Figure 1

Sample demographics



Data Analysis

As stated above, a phenomenological research approach involves three main steps to achieve its objective of assigning meaning to the phenomenon under investigation. These three steps include collection of descriptions of lived experiences, reduction of data into essential themes, and hermeneutic interpretations of themes (Orbe 1998). In the communication discipline, the most commonly used phenomenological techniques for gathering descriptions include focus groups, in-depth interviewing, and critical incidents (Orbe, 1998). I used the in-depth interviewing technique to gather the lived air travel experiences of individuals with vision disabilities in this study.

Phenomenological description. Interviews are one of the most effective techniques of gathering data as it allows co-researchers to describe their stories and experiences in their own words (Anderson & Jack, 1991). Rubin and Rubin (2011) outline three main characteristics of in-depth interviews: (a) in-depth interviews are best suited for gaining rich and detailed information as they help in facilitating solicitation of examples, experiences, narratives and stories, (b) in-depth interviews are open-ended in nature allowing the interviewee the freedom and choice to elaborate upon answers, to disagree with questions, or to raise new issues, and (c) in-depth interviews allow researchers flexibility to change, adapt or add new questions for each co-researcher based on the stories/experiences shared. Furthermore, in-depth interviews can be semi-structured or unstructured (Rubin & Rubin, 2011; Tracy, 2020). I used semi-structured interviews to collect descriptions of co-researchers' lived air travel experiences in this study. The semi-structured interviews encourage more emic, emergent understandings to surface, and do not constrain the interviewee to limit their responses to the scripted questions (Tracy, 2020).

I prepared an interview guide for the study that consisted of non-directive, open-ended questions that allowed me to tap into the content as well as the emotions attached to the co-researchers' experiences (Lindloff & Taylor, 2017; Tracy, 2020). Non-directive questions are defined as questions that “gives subjects the freedom to define the scope and terms of their response” (Lindloff & Taylor, 2017, p. 256). I used a variety of non-directive questions including “tour questions,” “example and experience questions” and “why” questions to elicit co-researchers' travel experiences (Lindloff & Taylor, 2017, pp. 256-259). For instance, I began each interview by asking questions such as “how does a

typical air trip look like for you?"; "What arrangements (if any) do you make for your air travel?"; and "How do you feel about traveling independently?" This approach enabled me to listen more, to adapt to the co-researchers' unique experiences, and to reflect and cede control of the discussion to the co-researchers (Tracy 2020).

In addition, I made concerted efforts to bracket my own experiences to co-researchers' responses that intuitively made sense to me. I did this by asking "devil's advocate questions"—which are directive questions that take a position that "are implicitly (or even explicitly) opposed to the subject's position, or calls the subject's assumptions into question" (Lindloff & Taylor, 2017, p. 264). This not only challenged the co-researchers' assumptions but also my own assumptions as a traveler who has a vision disability.

All interviews with co-researchers were synchronous and mediated, conducted over a telephone. One of the primary strengths of mediated interviews is to cost-effectively reach participants who are distributed across a wide geographical area or to access those who desire to stay at home due to a disability, high anxiety, or the need to care for a family member or pet (Lobe, 2017; Tracy, 2020). Given the scope of the study, to tap into the lived air travel experiences of vision impaired individuals across the nation, synchronous mediated interviews were viewed as the best option for data collection.

Interviews were audio-taped with the co-researchers' consent and were transcribed verbatim yielding approximately 402 pages of single-spaced data. As such, the primary data for this study consisted of audio tapes and transcripts from 42 co-researchers who had experiences of traveling independently with their vision disability.

Interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes based on the level and depth of the stories and experiences that co-researchers shared. Because the transcription process was outsourced to a transcription company, I repeatedly reviewed each transcript to ensure consistency with the audio recorded interviews. This process involved checking each transcript line-by-line with each audio recording, paying attention to spelling and grammatical mistakes, missing words, or lines, and ensuring that the paralinguistic features had been accurately included in the transcript.

Phenomenological reduction. The second step in the phenomenological inquiry is data reduction. The primary goal of data reduction is to determine which parts of the description are essential and which are not (Lanigan, 1979). Orbe (1998) explains that a crucial preparatory step to phenomenological reduction is to “horizontalize” all descriptions so that the researcher views each characterization as equally important (p. 42). After all interviews were transcribed and personally verified for accuracy and consistency with the audio recordings, I made multiple readings of each transcript treating descriptions horizontally by not adding any notations. This step allowed me to familiarize myself and fully immerse myself with the data. I then entered into the actual reduction phase by using the thematic analysis techniques discussed below.

I used Owen’s (1984) and Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis techniques to complete the phenomenological reduction and interpretation phase. Owen’s (1984) thematic analysis technique outlines three criteria for analyzing data that include: (a) recurrence, (b) repetition, and (c) forcefulness. *Recurrence* concerns the occurrence of at least two parts of a report that have the same thread of meaning. Recurrence does not imply repetition of the exact same word or phrase but different words or phrases that are

used to convey the same meaning. In other words, the criterion of recurrence is observed through salient meanings. *Repetition* refers to the exact same use or duplication of words, phrases or sentences multiple times in a report. *Forcefulness* considers the vocal inflections of co-researchers while sharing their experiences in the interview. Vocal inflections may include pauses, laughter, stressors, volume, pitch variations and use of certain metaphors/adages to convey feelings. Thus, Owen's (1984) thematic analysis technique facilitated the narrowing down of data into theme and theory driven categories.

In addition, the overall theme identification process was guided by the six-step thematic analysis technique outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis is not meant merely to describe or summarize key patterns in data, but also involves telling an interpretive story about the data in relation to a research question (Braun, Clarke, Hayfield & Terry, 2019). The six steps include (a) familiarizing oneself with the data and identifying items of potential interest, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing potential themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing the report.

After completing the first step of familiarizing myself with the data using the horizontal approach (Orbe, 1998), I entered another round of reading each transcript, this time identifying each sentence/paragraph that seemed relevant to the research questions of the study. I created a two-column table with RQ1 and RQ2 at the bottom of each transcript. I copied the line numbers and paragraph numbers corresponding to each chunk of co-researchers' description that I understood to be relevant to either of the two research questions in these columns. This step also enabled me to identify portions of the

transcript that could eventually be eliminated due to their irrelevance to the research topic.

The most commonly used technique of reducing data is to add annotations/comments and to color code/highlight text, which are very visual techniques. However, I chose to create columns and hyperlinked each paragraph number included in the columns back to the corresponding chunk of description for easy access. This method was adapted to meet my needs of working with a screen reader. Similarly, instead of using the traditional visual methods of highlighting or italicizing words/phrases for marking the forcefulness criteria, I assigned special characters to words/phrases such that each character represented a specific vocal inflection (e.g., # for special emphasis, ^ for metaphor, > for laughter).

After reducing data in each transcript into columns, I revisited the paragraph numbers in each column and grouped them together following the three criteria identified by Owen (1984). This enabled me to reduce the data further by assigning initial codes to each group of paragraphs based on their content. I conducted this step for all 42 transcripts. I reviewed all codes once again to remove any typing errors or coding mistakes that were missed. The grouping of paragraphs in the transcript and the assigning of codes to each group significantly reduced the data into manageable tables of relevant text.

Phenomenological interpretation. The basic idea behind phenomenological interpretation is to discover the interrelatedness among themes that link the phenomenon under investigation with consciousness (Nelson, 1989). The primary focus is to look for and identify the meanings behind themes that were not immediately apparent in earlier

steps. This process of identifying meanings that were not immediately apparent is also referred to as Hyperreflection (Merleau-Ponty, 1968).

I copied all initial codes from all 42 transcripts into a table that represented a matrix. The rows of this table included the transcript number whereas the columns included the initial codes from the corresponding transcript. This allowed me to compare and contrast codes across all 42 transcripts. Repeated comparisons of these codes facilitated identification of emerging patterns, trends, and themes in the data. A comparison of the codes in the first five transcripts in the matrix yielded identification of a total of nine themes initially. Moving to the remaining transcripts new themes were added as they appeared and existing themes were further developed and expanded.

The initial themes that emerged in the reduction phase were further reviewed with the intention of generating ideas about how those themes related to one another, how the interrelation of these themes shaped the interpretations, and how these interpretations in turn affected the phenomenon under investigation. The interpretations were also re-examined for accuracy, thus, following a process of simultaneously thematizing, bracketing, interpreting, and then repeating the process again, also known as a hermeneutic spiral or hermeneutic circle (Nelson, 1989).

Validity and Reliability of Findings

Orbe (1998) alerts researchers against the possibility of complete reduction and interpretation. Given the intersubjective nature of our interpretations, they are never final but should be viewed as an ongoing and dynamic process (Orbe, 1998). Orbe (1998) added that our interpretations change the instant that we view the "finished" product and begin to reflect on it. In an attempt to further strengthen and ensure the accuracy of the

interpretations made at the time of data analysis, I conducted member checks with a subset of the co-researchers.

Member check or member validation is defined as the process of taking our findings back to the participants and receiving feedback from them regarding whether they recognize the findings as plausible and accurate (Creswell, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lindloff & Taylor, 2017). Once final themes were identified, these were shared with the co-researchers in the form of aggregate findings over phone and via email (Appendix C). Co-researchers were asked to indicate whether these themes accurately represented their air travel experiences. Co-researchers also were asked to add any additional comments on the identified themes if they chose to do so. Nine co-researchers participated in member-checks and indicated that the themes resonated with their experiences. A few co-researchers offered additional comments that further substantiated the interpretations and these comments were incorporated into the final reporting of results.

Reliability of results is also an important aspect of any qualitative study. One approach to ensure reliability is to practice self-reflexivity. Only by consciously involving oneself with this process can researchers begin to bracket their conscious experience when the phenomenological description, collection, and transcription begin (Lanigan, 1979). I addressed the topic of reliability earlier in this chapter by offering my positionality with regard to the primary purpose and scope of this study. Upon reflection of my own experiences and those shared by co-researchers there does seem to be a high degree of reliability across shared or common experiences.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Co-researchers identified a number of issues related to receiving assistance services that they experienced frequently in their air travel (RQ1). These issues were classified into four main types that included personnel training issues, systemic issues, policy issues, and physical accessibility issues. Co-researchers also discussed a variety of communication practices as response strategies that they commonly use to manage these issues effectively (RQ2). The communication practices shared by co-researchers align with four of the nine communication orientations identified by Orbe (1998) and include assertive accommodation, aggressive accommodation, nonassertive assimilation, and assertive assimilation. The assistance-related issues are discussed first, followed by a discussion of the communication practices that co-researchers used most frequently. The analysis also includes participant exemplars to further illustrate the findings and emergent themes. To ensure confidentiality of participants, participant quotes are identified by the assigned number to each Interviewee (i.e., Interviewee 5 refers to participant 5 in this study).

Research Question One (Assistance-related Experiences)

Research question 1 (RQ1) aimed to examine the air travel experiences of individuals with vision disabilities with a focus on the assistance they receive on the ground and on board. A variety of issues were identified in this study that co-researchers discussed experiencing on a frequent basis in their air travel. These issues were classified into four main types (table 1) and are discussed in the subsequent paragraphs in detail

Personnel training issues. In discussing their air travel experiences, co-researchers pointed to a large number of issues that related to their experience with receiving assistance from personnel including sighted guides, Transportation Security Administration (TSA) agents, flight attendants, and gate agents. Personnel training also formed the largest category of assistance-related issues that co-researchers reported sharing in this study. Co-researchers unanimously raised the issue of poor training of personnel when it comes to assisting blind or visually impaired travelers. Based on the co-researchers' accounts, the training issues were further classified into three types – (a). Attitude Issues, (b). Disability Etiquette and Escorting Issues, and (c). Disability Knowledge and Awareness Issues.

Attitude issues. Attitude Issues referred to the personnel's stereotypical beliefs about blindness which in turn dictated the ways in which they behaved with the co-researchers while assisting them. For many co-researchers, specific communication styles that involved treating co-researchers as a child were particularly problematic and even offensive. These communication behaviors took the form of addressing a fellow traveler instead of the co-researcher directly or using words/phrases to address the co-researchers that are commonly used when communicating with a child. For example, one female co-researcher shared her experience at the gate:

The verbiage changes. I'm a Southern girl, and so I don't notice it that much because in the South everybody uses terms of endearment, sweetie, honey, for everybody, but if I really do pay attention to the people in front of me, they're "ma'am" and I'm "sweetie" or "honey". (Interviewee 20)

Another co-researcher expressed her feelings when personnel address her travel companion instead of her directly. She commented, “It makes you feel obviously different like you're being treated less since you're not being addressed as a grown individual” (Interviewee 43). For other co-researchers, the infantilizing attitude of personnel was more evident in their actions. As one co-researcher shared:

I would say the worst thing is sometimes people are really condescending, like giving people next to me - Maybe I'll order a club soda or something like that and they hand the person next to me a soda and a regular glass and they hand me a soda in a child's cup with a lid. I am more likely to spill it on myself than the person that's sitting next to me! It hurts your feelings when somebody treats you like a child. (Interviewee 29)

Upon delving deeper, co-researchers offered a common reason for the staff's infantilizing attitude. The personnel automatically presume incompetence when they see someone with a white cane or a guide dog based on their preconceived notions about blindness and, therefore, they feel a sense of moral responsibility to help without offering it first. In doing so, personnel inadvertently become paternalistic in the way they communicate or act, and they even end up over-assisting blind travelers in certain situations. Co-researchers offered several examples to illustrate this over-assisting behavior of personnel, especially sighted guides, who tend to have low expectations about travelers' abilities to do things independently.

Sighted guides are personnel who walk with a blind or visually impaired traveler either side by side giving verbal directions, or a few steps ahead of the traveler with the traveler holding the guide's elbow to stay on track while they are listening to the guide's

verbal directions. Sighted guides typically escort blind travelers from the check-in through the security screenings and to the gate. Co-researchers, as any other sighted travelers, prefer to hold on to their own travel documents. However, they shared accounts of being forced by sighted guides to relinquish their travel documents against their wishes:

I will say, "Excuse me, I'd like my boarding pass back." "That's okay, I can hold it for you." "No. I would like to hold it myself. It's my boarding pass." "Well, you might lose it." "Well, you might lose it too, so let me be the one to lose it since it's my boarding pass. (Interviewee 42).

Such assistance behaviors caused co-researchers frustration as well as anxiety since sighted guides often did not ask before helping. One co-researcher mentioned, "They just took it, like 'Where's my bag?' 'They took it already for you.' Okay, I did not ask for that, number one. Number two, I hope they grab the right bag" (Interviewee 43)

The infantilizing and paternalistic attitude of sighted people toward individuals who are blind or vision impaired is not a novel phenomenon identified in this study. It has been documented by several other studies that examine the communication between people with and without disabilities (Braithwaite, 1990; Braithwaite, 1991; Fox et al., 2000; Smith & Kandath, 2000). Fox et al. (2000) explained that people without disabilities often engage in paternalistic behaviors or speech (e.g. baby-talk) in an attempt to reinforce their social identity as nurturing and considerate individuals. People who are blind or vision impaired, on the other hand, prefer to be seen as able communicators and like to be addressed just as any other mature sighted individual would (Smith & Kandath, 2000). These conflicting social and personal norms between the sighted and the blind

cause communication differences that ultimately lead to misunderstandings and frustrations (Emry & Wiseman, 1981). The feelings of frustration were also noted in co-researchers' accounts regarding the poor training of personnel concerning disability etiquette and how to properly assist blind travelers.

Disability etiquette and escorting issues. Many co-researchers expressed their dissatisfaction with the manner in which they were guided by staff. Pushing/grabbing was a common problem that emerged throughout most transcripts and included inappropriate behaviors such as staff holding fingers, white canes, or other items like the handle of backpacks or luggage. Co-researchers also commented on the staff's poor escorting skills especially when they are accompanied by their guide dogs. As one co-researcher noted:

Some people are good at it, but not all and certainly not everywhere. There are a lot of people who just, they figure out, "Okay, well, I'm going to follow you," or especially when I've traveled with a guide dog, they'll just be like, "Oh, the dog will follow me," and they just, start taking off and heading somewhere. Then, I am just like, "Well, if you don't speak up, I don't get to know where you are, or whatever." (Interviewee 18)

Individuals who are blind or vision impaired often prefer maintaining their independence for moving around places. It is not antithetical then, that co-researchers in this study would be perturbed by sighted guides drawing others' attention toward them while providing assistance. As Interviewee 45 expressed, "Excuse me, excuse me, move out of the way, move." It is like, "Part ways, blind person coming through". The act of publicly acknowledging visually impaired travelers not only singled them out in the crowd, but also caused them to experience a sense of cognitive dissonance between their perceived

self-identity as an independent individual and the one being broadcast by assistance providers.

Furthermore, in an effort to maintain their independence, individuals who are blind or vision impaired rely heavily on verbal directions from sighted individuals, especially in unfamiliar places, to navigate their way. Co-researchers in this study commented on staff's ineptness to offer good verbal directions. One co-researcher, who is a guide dog user explained that it is important for her to know where the door is relative to where she is sitting at the gate so that she can independently board the plane by directing her guide dog to the door. However, she commented that personnel are not trained at giving verbal directions to blind travelers:

Many struggle with that concept. Sometimes they are good about, "Okay it's off to your left, it's off at nine o'clock". Sometimes they just have no idea what I am asking. Many take the attitude up right to your seat, and that is good enough, and walk away. (Interviewee 22)

On several occasions, the escorting experience of co-researchers was also found to be impacted by the personnel's inability to speak English. One co-researcher shared his struggle in explaining to the sighted guides what type of assistance he needed:

Upon exiting a flight in Phoenix, there was a man there to help me to my next gate. I had a backpack and another bag with me that I thought I had handed to him. I asked if he had it as we went up the ramp to exit the plane. He seemed very confused and kept walking, so I asked him again if he had my other bag. He clearly did not know what I was asking due to his lack of English skills. We walked back down to the plane and he tells the flight attendant I left a bag, so she

leaves to try and find it on the plane. I told him no, I brought it off with me and handed it to someone and he was still confused. Someone near by heard me and somehow found my other bag and handed it to me. (Interviewee 45)

In the above example, the communication dynamic was unique given the co-researcher's vision impairment and their inability to notice queues that would have signaled a lack of understanding on the part of the assistance provider. While the traveler's inability to visually spot their bag instigated the incident, their inability to monitor the nonverbal cues of a second language speaker compounded the prolonged confusion between him and the sighted guide. Thus, language and absence of sight further problematized the assistance experiences of co-researchers in this study. One co-researcher's explanation best summarized the essence of this issue:

It can be frustrating because as a blind person, you can't point to something and use other body language or gestures to communicate with somebody that does not speak English very well. That makes it even more difficult because you cannot understand them, they're maybe not understanding you and there's not another way or means to get an idea or point or question across to them where each party is understanding each other. (Interviewee 45)

While several co-researchers expressed their frustration with the poor training of staff as sighted guides, some also acknowledged that their experiences with sighted guides varied from airport to airport and from person to person. One co-researcher's description of a positive experience clearly articulated the ideal way of assisting blind travelers.

I had one assistant who was very much into architecture and he tried to provide a description of the general theme of the airport. He gave all the descriptions -- the

directional, and he also gave a visual description of the area, so he said, "The airport is pretty famous for its architecture, the floor that we're walking on is this color, it's made out of this marble. Over on the right we are passing by this mosaic. The mosaic is-" it was like a museum. That is really cool. Not necessary, but very, very cool. (Interviewee 33)

The co-researcher further added how this experience was in fact an equitable travel experience and perhaps even more enjoyable than sighted travelers who often miss appreciating such details in their hurry to catch a flight.

Braithwaite and Eckstein (2003), who examined how people with disabilities communicatively manage offers of assistance from strangers, found five main suggestions that their participants shared for anyone who initiates an offer of assistance. One of these suggestions was "willingness to follow the instructions of the person with a disability" (Braithwaite & Eckstein, 2003, p. 16). Consistent with these findings, personnel's appropriate escorting etiquette and willingness to listen to the traveler's specific needs and preferences was of paramount importance to co-researchers in this study. When asked about the most comforting part of their travel, many co-researchers expressed how they found themselves relieved of all stress and worries once they knew they have a sighted guide who was willing to learn and adapt to their needs. However, this was rare and far from reality for many co-researchers in this study as some personnel were not aware of some of the most basic information that was essential to their job duties.

Knowledge and awareness issues. Co-researchers described a number of problem areas and instances where personnel did not know the basics of blindness and vision

impairment that are crucial in performing their job duties when they need to assist a blind traveler. Several of these issues relate to TSA agents' training. One co-researcher who is a guide dog user commented, "The problem is when they have no clue how to handle the service dog and they demand that I hand over my service dog to them" (Interviewee 7). Handing over the guide dog was unacceptable to co-researchers because of logistical reasons. As one co-researcher explained:

They do not understand the need or the importance of the handle for maintaining control of their own dog. To them, they are just like, "Someone can hold it while you go through." I am like, "Okay, so then what?" [chuckles] Someone's holding him and then, what, is the person going to let go when I call the dog? How am I going to guarantee that the dog is going to run through the metal detector if I do not have the leash at my hands? (Interviewee 10)

In lieu of the increased disability sensitivity and law enforcement over the recent years, co-researchers expressed their disappointment with the level of ignorance some of the TSA agents had. They noted that some TSA agents seem to have little to no knowledge about white canes. This meant that while some TSA agents did not know the protocol to check white canes, others simply did not know what they signified or what they were even called:

There seems to be confusion on whether my cane has to go through the X-ray or not. At the same airport, I have had different people tell me, "You can put it through, but you can't fold it up." "Okay, you have to put it through, but you have to fold it up," or "You don't have to put it through. You can just carry it." (Interviewee 19)

It is noteworthy that as much as these co-researchers were disappointed with the limited knowledge of the personnel, they were even more concerned with the amount of time they had to wait while personnel tried to determine what the protocol was to handle white canes and service dogs. Sometimes, co-researchers also were baffled with some of the security protocols that were not explained properly by TSA agents such as hand swipes or additional pat-downs. Co-researchers expected more clarity on these protocols.

Additionally, co-researchers emphasized on the need for TSA agents to be more knowledgeable about the handling of assistive aids and devices commonly used by blind travelers. One co-researcher shared his experience of how his notetaker that could technically go through scanners does not tend to work properly after it has been through these scanners. He shared that it was difficult to explain to TSA agents how hand-checks of such adaptive equipment's were safer than the x-ray scans. A few co-researchers also stressed the importance of having their items arranged in order and their concerns about getting them back in the same order after security checks, "When they're checking everything, they're pulling it out, and then they just shove everything back into the bag the way they want to. Once again, as a blind person, you do not know if they put everything back. You don't know if anything's dropped onto the floor" (Interviewee 39).

In an effort to maintain their independence, co-researchers expressed their preference to walk from the check-in to the gate with the assistance of a sighted guide. However, they complained about persistent offers of wheelchair assistance by several personnel. Interviewee 32 commented, "Often times they will tell me they have to put me in a wheelchair. This is an ongoing issue. They seem to think the only disability is not having your legs work" Some co-researchers complained about staff unaware of dog

relief areas and their location at the airports. Upon requesting to be escorted to a dog relief area, some workers denied the existence of one at the airport or excused themselves to find out about it and took a really long time to return with information.

Aside from sighted guides and TSA agents, the training of flight attendants was also sometimes problematic and unhelpful for a few co-researchers. A frequent issue that co-researchers cited was that the safety briefings were not always adequately adapted to serve the needs of blind or vision impaired travelers. One co-researcher stated, “I’ve never seen the oxygen mask. If we were actually at an emergency, I would be figuring it out for the first time because yes, they tell you that an oxygen mask will come down, but you can’t see the demonstration.” (Interviewee 30). Other issues with flight attendants included their misconceptions that all blind people can read Braille cards, all blind travelers need assistance with lifting and placing their bags in the overhead bins, and all blind travelers who travel with guide dogs prefer bulkhead seats.

The assistance experiences discussed by co-researchers in the above sections encompass a gamut of personnel training issues ranging from disability sensitivity to escorting and communication skills that need to be addressed. The excerpts indicate that vision disability is often confused with other kinds of disabilities such as speech and hearing difficulties where personnel talk too slowly, loudly, or indirectly, or with mobility disabilities where personnel insist blind travelers be assisted by a wheelchair. The protocols related to security checks for blind travelers remain ambiguous for some TSA agents, and flight attendants need more specialized training on how to assist blind travelers without being too lax or too paternalistic. While some of the issues shared by co-researchers stem directly from a lack of specialized training that focuses on how to

assist blind travelers, others originate from a higher, systemic, and structural level that determine how assistance services are delivered.

System issues. Co-researchers pointed to a number of issues that relate to the administrative system in which the assistance services are managed and delivered to blind travelers. These services include assistance with everything from checking-in to helping with baggage claim and getting to ground transportation spots. One of the most significant of these issues for co-researchers was the fact that requesting assistance in advance does not necessarily translate into an immediate and/or appropriate response from staff at check-in and/or at a connecting airport. Many co-researchers shared experiences where they were asked to wait for long periods of time to get an assistant assigned to them:

It is not logged in their system. Does not seem like it is because they've never been like, "Oh yes, we were expecting you and we knew that you would need this accommodation." When I get to the airport, it seems like there is a disconnect between the reservation bookings stage and when I arrive at the airport.

(Interviewee 9)

The lack of proper internal communication systems that impede the efficient delivery of assistance services for blind travelers caused immense frustration for co-researchers. Some even viewed it as a violation of their basic travel rights:

I get off the airplane and sometimes it's, you know, one of the staff will walk me up to the podium and, " Oh, I didn't know or no, we haven't called for assistance or, oh, I'll call for assistance." Yes. It is like-- Well, hey, it's an afterthought. What

the hell. I should be in the system as a traveling person who needs assistance, not only getting on the airplane but getting off the airplane. (Interviewee 32)

The waiting caused anxiety and stress for many co-researchers especially in tight situations where they had to board their connecting flight in a very short time As Interviewee 15 commented, “Sometimes it’s felt really really really close. I think that’s something that could be handled better”. On the other hand, the unavailability of assistance at the gate when the time to board the connecting flight was too long, or when the flight was delayed also proved problematic for many co-researchers in this study. The current system only requires sighted guides to assist blind travelers from the check-in through the security and to the gate. They are not required to wait with the travelers whom they are assisting until they board the plane. One co-researcher explained her challenges with the unavailability of assistance at the gate:

At that point it is, in many ways, a done deal. Like if I wanted to go to the bathroom or get something to eat, I will have needed to have done that prior to sitting down. If while I am sitting down I want some water- there's no service at that point without asking a passenger for assistance. That extra four or five hours where we are just stuck in one place, that’s the hardest part, for me. (Interviewee 17)

Many appreciated the sighted guides who offered to assist with stopping over at a restaurant to eat even though they are not required to do so under law. Furthermore, the excerpts indicated a divided view on the availability of staff at the gate especially in gate change situations or when they had a lot of time before boarding. Some expressed being very anxious. One co-researcher explained, “I go up to the podium pretty frequently

because I don't want to be forgotten and I've been left off of a couple of air flights. I have also been left in an empty terminal a couple of times” (Interviewee 32). On the other hand, a few co-researchers did not find it stressful as long as they were able to solicit help from co-passengers sitting close-by for walking to the new gate. One possible reason for the contrasting views could be the difference in the co-researchers’ mobility skills and/or degree of vision impairment that influenced their comfort and confidence in navigating independently (Small et al., 2012).

The unavailability of assistance from the entrance of the airport to the check-in counter was another problem area for co-researchers. A majority of them had to rely on passer-bys to find their way to the check-in. For instance, Interviewee 22 commented on this issue, “Finding my way into an airport is one of the hardest, finding my way through the airport, well, finding my way to where I can get assistance is difficult almost always”. A few co-researchers also shared the difficulties when one guide is assisting multiple travelers with disabilities at the same time:

I have the Global Entry thing, so that I can go through the Precheck. I have been forced to go through the regular line because the guide had an extra person that wasn't Prechecked. I have been forced to go with a group of people instead of one. (Interviewee 17)

Finally, a few co-researchers mentioned the system of being transported to the holding areas as unacceptable. These holding areas are specifically designated rooms for travelers needing assistance. Travelers are taken to these holding rooms where they can wait until it is time for them to board. The problem with these holding areas varied from co-researcher to co-researcher. While some were just unhappy with the physical features of

the room (i.e. dark and dingy) others were concerned about their safety. One co-researcher expressed her apprehensions with this arrangement:

The problem with the holding areas is that they are out of sight of the general populations and so they are territory for abuses or other aggressive behavior from people. I find the holding areas, on the whole, unpleasant. They should be visible to- if they must have a distribution center or this apparently “self-loading cargo”, it should be within sight and hearing distance of the general population.

(Interviewee 28).

Overall, in their discussion of these system issues, the comments of co-researchers alluded to a bigger problem hidden underneath the issues themselves. The problem of not feeling equal to their sighted co-passengers, both physically and psychologically. One co-researcher shared this sentiment in her comment... “it bothers me. It bothers me because other people are walking and they are getting to their gate independently and I’m waiting for assistance. It bothers me a little bit” (Interviewee 26). In addition to the systemic issues, the feelings of being treated differently were also reflected in some of the policy-related issues that co-researchers shared in this study.

Policy issues. Co-researchers made a number of policy-related issues as well as suggestions that directly pertain to the travel of individuals who are blind or vision impaired. One of the most widely cited policy issues was the airlines’ increasing demands of documentation for service dogs. Interviewee 26 explained, “I’ve been told I can’t bring my dog on the flight. I’ve had to give additional documentation that was unnecessary that they asked for”. The reason airlines ask for documentation, as explained by some co-researchers, is because of the increase in the number of air travelers who bring “fake”

Emotional Support Animals (ESA), suggesting that “It's not fair to us that other people don't want to put their dogs in a kennel so they pretend that they're service dogs” (Interviewee 13). While co-researchers acknowledged the importance and value of legitimate ESAs for travelers who need them, they emphatically spoke on the need for airlines to have a policy in place that clearly distinguishes between dogs who serve as ESA and those who are service dogs, so they do not have to carry paperwork all the time and feel discriminated. In the absence of such a system currently, one co-researcher described her conversation with an airline booking agent and the frustration it caused:

I was just on the phone today with XYZ Airlines.¹ I said I was traveling with my guide dog. "Oh, your service dog?" I'm like, "It's my guide dog. I am blind. I need the dog." They are like, "Well, it's not an emotional support dog, right?" I am like, "No. I can't see." He was like, "Okay. I have to be extra careful about that." I'm like, "No. This is not my emotional support, whatever." He is like, "Oh, and your dog can ride in your lap?" I am like, "Nobody's guide dog should be riding in their lap on an airplane." (Interviewee 18)

Also related to guide dogs, co-researchers raised the issue of forced bulkhead seating. They pointed to incidents when flight attendants insisted on seating them in the bulkhead row because they were traveling with guide dogs. Several co-researchers vehemently expressed that flight attendants are not supposed to impose bulkhead seating. While some attributed it to training issue, others believed that flight attendants intentionally make it seem like it is a violation of regulation. For instance, one co-researcher commented, “I

¹ Co-researchers in this study referred to a total of four US-based airlines that included American, United, Southwest, and Delta. Some co-researchers reported difficulty recalling the names of airlines among the four given the retrospective nature of the interviews. Therefore, references to airlines are made using “XYZ” instead of their actual names.

am almost 100% positive that it's not regulation that someone with a dog has to sit there. It's more like that's what the airline thinks that you need and so that's where you have to sit” (Interviewee 45).

Co-researchers explained that while some blind travelers may prefer bulkhead seating, others find it inconvenient for a number of reasons that revolve primarily around the safety of their dogs, Interviewee 20 explained her reasons, “The bulkhead row is the worst place to sit because if there’s turbulence, there's nothing to prevent the dog from bouncing around”. Several others echoed similar concerns that the bulkhead seating causes their dog to be accidentally stamped on by flight attendants and seatmates.

Another co-researcher explained the advantage of a regular seat:

The dog's tail is not out anywhere, the dog's face is under my control by my feet, and I have the leash under my foot and then a loop of the leash on my wrist. We take up only our own space. Oh! and the dog is covered, nothing can fall on the dog. (Interviewee 37)

Co-researchers also expressed dissent about specific policies that relate to emergency situations. They found it objectionable when they were asked by flight attendants to wait until someone comes to assist them in an emergency situation. Co-researchers found this objectionable on two main grounds. First, they feel that they are perfectly capable to walk up from their seats and navigate to the exit doors if needed. As Interviewee 32 remarked, “I don't know if that's an airline policy or somebody else's decision. But in an emergency, I almost always keep ahead and I'm going to be a helper for other people who are distressed rather than one who needs help”. Second, a few co-researchers regarded the

instructions to wait while all other sighted passengers find their way out as an act of discrimination. As one co-researcher described:

I want you to listen to this wording carefully, "If there's an emergency, you wait in your seat and once we get the passengers off, we'll come back and get you."

Once you get the "passengers "off"? I thought I was one! I thought I was a paying passenger in the list." I have had that kind of wording used with me. (Interviewee 21)

Several co-researchers also criticized the regulation of prohibiting blind travelers from sitting in the exit row. All the co-researchers who raised this issue strongly believed that they are equally, if not more, competent to navigate their way to the exit door. While a sighted individual may need some time to adapt to dark aircraft cabins in an emergency situation, a blind individual may be able to do it more efficiently, as one co-researcher expressed her feelings, "That's silly, I'd rather a blind person be responsible for trying to help me navigate out of a plane than a sighted person because they're used to depending on their eyeballs!" (Interviewee 20). The collective sense of the comments made by co-researchers on this issue indicated their indignation with the idea of putting all blind travelers into one box. They argued that their interests and abilities vary from person to person and should not be judged on one's blindness alone:

I am quite capable of getting out of my seat, of seeing if anyone around me needs help, and of herding them toward the door. There is the big handle on the door that you pull down. You shove the door open. The raft comes out and it inflates. It will detach from the plane and become a ramp. All that stuff because I have always paid attention. (Interviewee 42)

Table 1

Categories of Assistance-related Issues with Descriptions

Assistance-related Issues	Definitions
Personnel Training Issues	Issues related to the training of personnel including sighted guides, TSA agents, flight attendants, and gate agents regarding attitude, disability etiquette, knowledge, and awareness of living with blindness.
System Issues	Issues related to the administrative system in which assistance services are managed and delivered to blind travelers
Policy Issues	Issues concerning air travel policies and regulations as they relate to blind travelers
Physical Accessibility Issues	Issues related to the physical features of airports and aircrafts that make independent travel difficult for blind individuals

Another widely cited issue was the ambiguity with tipping policy for staff assisting blind travelers. One co-researcher shared his awkwardness with tipping personnel:

Sometimes, the attendants or the golf cart people, they have turned down a tip or they say, "We're not supposed to take tips. We're just helping you." I do not know if that's the general policy. I know when you check bags, I usually try to give someone a tip of a dollar or two, but I've had a lot of them refuse it so I don't know if they really are not supposed to, and the other ones that took it were not supposed to. (Interviewee 43)

Some co-researchers also stressed their rationale behind not mandating tipping for personnel. They dwelled on the importance of differentiating between the services offered by personnel at airports as an accessibility service from the services of someone who is simply carrying one's luggage to offer convenience. Interviewee 30 remarked, "This is not a convenient luxury this is a necessity, so I feel like because it's a necessity maybe I don't have to tip".

Overall, the issues that co-researchers discussed in this category reflected their feelings of dissatisfaction, frustration and in some cases, confusion about the existing airline policies and regulations as they related to vision impaired travelers. Co-researchers' accounts demonstrated that some of the existing policies did not necessarily correspond with their expectations, preferences, and abilities. While some of the co-researchers' issues discussed above may be addressed by revising specific policies and regulations (see recommendations offered in the discussion chapter), others may be addressed by concerted efforts on the part of crew members to better educate disgruntled vision-impaired travelers on why they are being asked to follow certain safety instructions pertaining to existing airline policies and federal regulations. This could help in alleviating some of the issues relating to perceived discrimination as discussed by co-researchers in the preceding paragraphs.

Physical accessibility issues. Co-researchers pointed to several physical aspects of air travel that remain largely inaccessible. For instance, the inaccessibility of ticketing kiosks compels blind travelers to ask for assistance which could be easily avoided if kiosks had braille/audio feedback. As one co-researcher expressed, "I really wish that we

could use the self-checking thing. I think that's the thing that a lot of people wish that they could, if it was accessible." (Interviewee 23)

The other accessibility issue that co-researchers pointed was the non-uniform layout of different airports and the different areas within them. Co-researchers explained how the lack of uniformity in airport layouts hamper their ability to navigate independently. For example, using the restroom requires either extra time to figure out the layout or more reliance on the sighted guide to verbally explain the layout. Either way the lack of uniformity causes an inequitable experience for the visually impaired. As one co-researcher remarked, "Public restrooms are always unique. They are usually quite large. Sometimes, there's different areas. One area just has a vanity, a different area has the stalls and the sinks. It can be a bit challenging" (Interviewee 19). The same co-researcher further explained how the non-uniform layouts compel her to use her hands to locate different elements such as the sinks, taps, and hand dryers. She explained that even though she can figure out the layout independently, it is certainly not the most hygienic and most time-efficient method. One related suggestion by co-researchers for airport inaccessibility was to have the layouts available to them in accessible formats. They shared that access to layouts could significantly boost their confidence and independence while decreasing their reliance on sighted guides. One co-researcher remarked:

The hardest is that I do not have a mental picture of the overall layout of an airport that I'm going to. Sadly, that information could be made available if people who knew how to describe spaces for blind people were paid to create online descriptions of airports, but that is not the case. (Interviewee 37)

Several in-flight accessibility issues were also raised by co-researchers including inaccessibility of call buttons, customs forms, safety information cards, and menus. These accessibility issues also unduly increase co-researchers reliance on the assistance of flight attendants:

If I fly on an international plane and each seat has a screen with a thousand channels to watch movies I could not navigate that by myself. I would have to have someone show me the buttons, to change the channel or what channel is this and know where I may need to plug headphones in. The seat pocket magazine, drink menu all those things are not accessible. I have to have someone read that to me if I need that information. (Interviewee 45)

Finally, co-researchers who were screen reader users discussed the difficulties with booking flight tickets independently. While some take the help of friends and family, others resort to airline booking agents. In addition, it is important to note that even though a website may be screen-reader compatible from a technical perspective, it may not necessarily offer an equivalent experience to blind travelers unless certain web accessibility guidelines are followed. One co-researcher explains how a booking website does not maximize screen reader efficiency for him:

When my wife does it, she can do it quickly. When I do it, I am using a screen reader and it should not be slow. When you are booking a flight, you enter your starting and initial destinations, time and all those details... but filling out that form, and when the options come up then it depends... Some websites are presented in a way that is easier to navigate and others are not. (Interviewee 25)

Overall, co-researchers' accounts of accessibility issues in this study indicate that there is a significant scope for making air travel more accessible to blind/vision impaired travelers. Including accessibility features in commonly used air travel technologies (e.g. ticketing kiosks, in-flight entertainment systems, call-buttons on airplanes, airline apps), print materials (e.g. custom forms, safety information cards, menu cards) and airline websites would tremendously increase the independence and improve the overall air travel experience of blind travelers.

Research Question Two (Communication Orientations & Practices)

Research question two (RQ2) of this study aimed to identify the communication orientations and the specific communication practices within each of these orientations that co-researchers most frequently adopted to manage the assistance-related issues that they experience. Four communication orientations were identified that include assertive accommodation, aggressive accommodation, nonassertive assimilation, and assertive assimilation (Orbe 1998). Each of these orientations and the corresponding communication practices are discussed in detail in the subsequent section (table 2).

Assertive accommodation. Individuals who adopt an assertive accommodation orientation strive to achieve a balance between the preferences of dominant group members and their own needs (Orbe, 1998). Their goal is to promote significant change in the structures that attempt to oppress Co-cultural group experiences. Communicating self, using liaisons, and educating others were the three primary communication practices that co-researchers used under the assertive accommodation orientation.

Communicating self. Orbe (1998) characterizes those using the communicating self communication practice as individuals with a strong self-concept who prefer to have

open, authentic, and genuine communication with dominant group members. Co-researchers in this study used the communicating self practice in a multitude of situations to assert their assistance needs and preferences. For instance, one lady explained how she communicates with TSA agents about handling of her white cane during security check:

When I am around them, I try to be firm, I mean, what I'll do is I'll go through, and they'll say "I need to see your cane" and I'll say, "Okay, this does not fold, just so you know, please tell the person scanning everything through", "Okay, I'll let them know." "And would you please give it back to me once we get through, because I need it." "Yes, we can do that." Most of the time they will do that.

(Interviewee 1)

Another security situation where a number of co-researchers described being open and direct in their communication is when they feel stressed about losing their belongings after they have gone through the security scan belt. One co-researcher explained how she circumvents the stress this potentially presents:

I'll just say, "Look, I'm blind. I do not see very well. I want you to put everything back the way it was." I say, "There's a reason why I've got things in there, and if you're going to take it apart, I expect you to put it back the way you found it."

(Interviewee 39)

Co-researchers shared that while general politeness is essential, being assertive is also important. As Interviewee 18 explained, Because "the 'pleases' and 'thank you's' and nice humor go a long way, when it doesn't, a firm intelligent explanation of what you really need and why you really need it, can go a long way" . The co-researcher further

elaborated on her thoughts by sharing an incident where she and her spouse wound up late because of assistance issues:

When we got to the gate and we found out our flight had just closed the door, and it was our honeymoon flight. "Please" and "thank you" only left us so far, and then the guy realized I was about to cry. I said, "Look, I'm sorry, standby is not going to happen. We have a cruise leaving in 12 hours and we plan to be on it. This is not our fault; this is not our doing. You guys need to help me. I will be very grateful for whatever you can do because this is the deal." He saw, I was carrying my bridal bouquet, there was no question, obviously. Eventually, they made sure we were on the next flight, even though it was in the morning, and they bumped us to first class. (Interviewee 18)

In their study that examined the civil rights discourse of individuals who engaged in public dialogue, Groscurth and Orbe (2006) found a sense of vulnerability in the accounts of their co-researchers who engaged in the communicating self practice. The authors assert that this sense of vulnerability ensued from their co-researchers' strong sense of self that enabled them to speak truth to power. In the above example, by allowing herself to be vulnerable to the gate agent about the reality of her situation, the co-researcher was able to get what she needed.

In other cases, co-researchers preferred to be more upfront and less vulnerable while communicating their needs. They used the communicating self practice in a manner that allowed them to proactively convey the message that they have control over their travel decisions just like any other sighted traveler who does not rely on assistance. For example, one co-researcher explained, "a few people think they are supposed to be totally

in charge, but mostly no. Once I established the tone of our engagement, of our interaction, they get it, they follow my lead” (Interviewee 37). Proactive communication by co-researchers was identified as a prominent way of communicating self especially to address certain systemic and personnel training issues. In some instances, this meant taking charge of how one needs to be assisted. Other times, co-researchers exercised proactive communication in anticipation of certain travel-related hindrances, as demonstrated by one co-researcher:

I normally will hit the call button right before the last go-around for them taking garbage. I’ll say, "Hey. Can you let the ground know I have a connecting flight and need assistance to get to my next gate?" Because they can call ahead on their phone. Normally, by the time we taxi to the gate, and everybody gets off, it does not take very long then I get out and the person's right there. (Interviewee 44)

Other co-researchers also shared similar acts of proactive communication with flight attendants to create more sensitivity about their specific needs around their blindness. Interviewee 46 shared, “I’ll say, ‘If it looks like I am resting or the fact that I don’t hear you when you come by, tap on me. It is okay. Let me know that you are here. Don’t just wave to me.’ Usually, that is worked out (Interviewee 46). Furthermore, several co-researchers equated the practice of communicating self with not being shy or afraid to ask for what they need from personnel. In other words, co-researchers practiced self-advocacy as a communicating self strategy to navigate through the different aspects of air travel and to manage the issues that they experienced in a preemptive manner. For example, one co-researcher regarded self-advocacy as the key to a successful air travel experience:

You need to speak up to any person you come across that has to do with part of your travel whether it's making a reservation with the airline on the phone, checking in at the curb, checking in on the counter, going to TSA, all of those people. If you need something, you are not clear on something just not being afraid in asking, "Why you're doing this?" or "What does this mean?" All of those things that- I think sighted people take it for granted. Again, in the plane, speaking up if you-- "I'm not sure what you mean when you say oxygen mask. What is it look like? How do I put it on? Where is the closest door?" Self-advocacy, that is probably first and foremost. That will make the difference between traveling successfully and less stress and not traveling successfully and more stress. (Interviewee 5)

Co-researchers who practice the communicating self strategy in this study demonstrate that they are comfortable with their blindness, are good self-advocates, and are not afraid to speak their minds and assert preferences for how they would like to receive assistance during travel. They are experienced travelers who can anticipate most of the issues with receiving assistance and can speak up for themselves to ensure that they are understood by the staff assisting them while being respected for who they are. Communicating self was identified to be the most frequently used Co-cultural communication practice by vision impaired participants in this study (table 3).

Educating others. In other instances, anticipating issues were not possible so the unexpected situations were viewed by Co-cultural group members as teaching opportunities to educate dominant group members about their needs and preferences specific to their blindness. Orbe (1998) refers to the communication practice of

enlightening dominant group members about one's specific co-culture as educating others. Co-researchers in this study offered several examples that demonstrate the educating others communication practice. Most of these examples predominantly involved two of the five assistance-related issues discussed previously (i.e., personnel training issues and systemic issues). Several co-researchers in this study, who were guide dog users, had to educate TSA agents about the importance of leaving the harness on the dog:

I said, "Sir, I'm allowed to keep my harness on my dog." I said, "She will sit right here, and I will go through the metal detector and I will not set it off. I'll call her through, and she will set it off because of the metal in her harness but then you're allowed to touch the harness, feel it, make sure there's nothing in it or whatever you want to do. You are allowed to feel the leash." (Interviewee 7)

Another training issue for which co-researchers shared using the educating others communication practice concerned teaching sighted guides how to properly assist visually impaired travelers. One lady who has a guide dog explained:

If I am in a case where I have to actually work with someone, a sighted guide, usually I'll tell them in advance, "My dog will follow you. You can walk several steps in advance of me. She walks very quickly. Please never interact with me or my dog." I give them a quick, like one-minute tutorial on how to interact with me. (Interviewee 8)

Co-researchers who were white cane users encountered situations with sighted guides that necessitated them to take a moment and educate the guides. For example, one co-researcher stated "If you want me to stop, say stop. Do not just jerk me or pull me

because it could knock me off my balance. I could fall” before adding “I’m offering free in-service training” (Interviewee 42). There were situations when co-researchers shared that staff were being paternalistic and undermining their abilities. In an attempt to address this issue, co-researchers adopted the educating others strategy to demonstrate their capability to do most things on their own. For instance, one co-researcher shared, “There have been times where I’ve even put my cane in their hand and said, “This is why my cane is so long, this is why I can find my seat and stuff” thereby confirming that “I try to educate when I’m traveling” (Interviewee 23).

Certain boarding and on-board situations were also identified where co-researchers found educating the staff as a useful communication strategy. For example, one co-researcher addressed an attitude issue of a gate agent who presumed that she wanted to pre-board because she was blind. The co-researcher educated the gate agent that pre-boarding was not solely because of her blindness but rather because she respected other co-passengers’ time and would rather settle down with her dog before they board so that she does not hold them up. The instances where certain actions of flight attendants offended co-researchers were also seen as teaching moments. One woman illustrated an incident when the flight attendant offended her by offering a child’s cup with a lid instead of a regular cup:

I try to just say to them at a separate time, like, “It really is offensive that you would assume that I would be more likely to spill my beverage than my neighbor. So, in the future, it’s probably better if you just ask the person if they would like a lid.” That is what I strive to do but I have to say I’m not always perfect.
(Interviewee 20)

The above co-researcher and a few others in this study were found to be more considerate of the timing and situation in which they chose to educate staff. Other co-researchers were more spontaneous and direct in certain situations. For example, one lady shared her experience on a flight while she was seated on an aisle seat and the flight attendant asked her to stay in her place until a crew member could come to assist her in case of an emergency. While the attendant was giving this safety instruction, the co-researcher's seatmate in the middle seat who overheard the instructions expressed his concern about being stuck until the co-researcher was helped. In this situation, the co-researcher commented how being spontaneous was imperative for her:

“I felt like my seatmate and the flight attendant were talking around me and I was disappearing from the conversation, I had to chime in and say – ‘If the lights go out, or there is smoke and no visibility, I can lead the way as an attempt to educate them and anybody else who might have been listening at the moment, to think about the implications of this policy. (Interviewee 15)

Co-researchers in this study who used the educating others practice were generally found to be alert and quick to notice any stereotypical or discriminatory behavior during their travel. They realized the value of educating personnel and co-passengers not only in their self-interest but also in the interest of the larger blind community. Orbe (1998) states that even though the opportunities to educate may sometimes be strenuous and laborious, it is seen as a crucial activity in changing the oppressive environments to more inclusive and accepting ones for Co-cultural group members. Consistent with this idea, co-researchers in this study were more forgiving of the inappropriate situations caused by personnel due to their attitude, training or adherence to policies and were willing to take the time to

educate others even if that meant repeating themselves multiple times. When some of these co-researchers were too frustrated or too exhausted with the constant need to educate personnel, they resorted to the using liaisons communication practice (Orbe & Spellers, 2005).

Using liaisons. Using liaisons is a communication strategy in which Co-cultural group members identify specific members from the dominant group whom they can rely on for receiving support, guidance, and assistance (Orbe, 1998). For this study, co-researchers regularly relied on fellow passengers and passer-bys at airports as their liaisons in a variety of travel scenarios where they needed assistance. For example, one co-researcher explained the effectiveness of this communication strategy in her air travel:

What I find is that people are generally more helpful than you would think. Even someone who is sitting next to you at the gate, if you just ask them, "Hey, do you know where the restroom is?" Is there a restaurant close by?" Sometimes, they will even just offer to help you to get there. (Interviewee 10)

Weathers and Hopson (2015) state that the support of dominant group members is essential to overcome disability-related issues and visually impaired travelers seem to understand the importance of drawing upon allies, particularly in challenging situations. For example, one traveler described how she would make particular pronouncements to draw attention to her "need to use this white cane" as "a disability aid" through security checks, publicly referencing the Americans with Disabilities Act and announcing "information loud enough that anybody who's standing around can hear me because you figure that way somebody agrees with you, and you have allies, and somebody knows what's going on". She added that doing so "will also intimidate the somebody who is

hassling you, whether they're doing it to be mean, or whether they're doing it out of ignorance. It gets them to stop doing what they're doing" (Interviewee 42).

Several co-researchers found liaisons to be particularly useful in situations when there was an absence of staff to assist. For example, when assistance was needed to find the terminal or check-in counter, one co-researcher stated, "If it's someone passing by, I'll, be like 'Excuse me. Can you tell me where the back of the line is for check in?' That is generally what I have to do in those situations" (Interviewee 45). And some co-researchers recognize the value of relying on more than one liaison to get from one place to another, "If I am alone, I usually have the cab driver walk me in and get me in line. Usually, then I just ask a fellow traveler, can you help me get up to the front of the line?" (Interviewee 4).

Co-researchers did not appear to get disheartened when liaisons were not helpful, but rather quickly moved on to find another ally. "I usually just ask a passerby and if they don't know I ask them, 'Do you see anybody that looks like an airport employee that you can point me to?' Then they point me" (Interviewee 13). Another situation in which several co-researchers reported seeking assistance from fellow-travelers was when there was a gate change and there was no one from ground staff around to walk them to the new gate. In these instances co-researchers recognized that "a bunch of people are all going to be going where you're going" and therefore "It's not that hard to make a new friend and say, 'Do you mind if I walk with you?'" (Interviewee 18).

Seeking the aid of co-travelers and passer-bys was identified to help co-researchers in two ways. First, it prevented them from having to wait for assistance to arrive, and second they could avoid relying on staff assistance wherever possible to feel

more independent. For example, Interviewee 14 remarked, "I will ask people around me rather than having an escort." Baggage claim is one more area where co-researchers sought the help of other people and fellow passengers. For instance, Interviewee 18 shared, "Sometimes, I'll be standing there with everybody else and I'll just say, "Hey, let me know when the big red ones come." A few co-researchers also sought liaisons to read flight information from the display monitors that is not otherwise accessible to them.

While the co-researchers in the above examples were more comfortable in proactively seeking liaisons, others were found to be more reclusive and used this communication practice sparingly:

Usually, I wait until the crowd thins out, -- because I still have a little bit of central vision and then I look for my baggage. Or if there is somebody standing next to me and we end up striking up a conversation, I'll just grab my bag and I ask them if they could help me verify it. (Interviewee 2)

Aside from passively seeking liaisons, Orbe (1998) states that some Co-cultural group members may recognize the benefits of having liaisons yet be frustrated by situations which demand that they forego their desire to operate independently and instead seek assistance. This frustration was clearly evident in some co-researchers' comments in this study. For example, one participant recounted standing around and simply saying "Excuse me. Excuse me. Can you direct me, or can you help me find?" despite acknowledging that "it's awkward" and leaves one feeling embarrassed, timid, and self-conscious. The co-researcher concluded: "I don't like it, but I have no choice. I just do it" (Interviewee 32).

A common issue for seeking help from strangers unique to individuals who are blind and vision impaired is to determine who to ask and how to spot them in absence of sight. Some co-researchers in this study explained how their good hearing skills augment their ability to find liaisons more efficiently. Interviewee 6 explained, “I just listen for the person at the microphone at each gate. Then I will walk up to them and say, ‘Hey, is this gate 25’, and they’ll say, ‘Oh no. That’s the one right next to me.’ Then I’ll go to that one.”

Orbe (1998) explains that while some Co-cultural group members may take a significantly long time to identify and collaborate with liaisons, others may be able to do it immediately. In this study, co-researchers were able to instantly seek co-travelers and bystanders as liaisons who could offer assistance. Orbe (1998) states that delays in developing allies could be due to the time it takes to establish trust with and confidence in dominant group members that would be willing to use their privileged positioning to assist. However, this was not the case for co-researchers in this study as the assistance was not only time sensitive, but also because the type of assistance needed was relatively simple and did not require much effort on the part of co-travelers and passer-bys. When outright and polite efforts to educate others or seek liaisons failed, co-researchers at times turned to more aggressive approaches.

Aggressive accommodation. Co-researchers were found to use aggressive forms of communication in certain situations when they could not stand the discriminatory behaviors of personnel or an access issue any longer. Orbe (1998) explains that those Co-cultural group members who adopt an aggressive communication orientation are generally less concerned about how they are perceived by dominant group members and

are more focused on changing the culture that marginalizes them in the dominant societal structures. In this study, co-researchers adopted the aggressive accommodation practice of confronting.

When assertiveness did not help gain the attention of staff and result in having one's needs met, co-researchers in this study used the practice of confronting. Confronting includes a variety of communication tactics ranging from malicious to belligerent behaviors directed toward dominant group members from less-empowered ones (Orbe, 1998). One co-researcher described how confronting was not her first choice, but how she inevitably resorts to confronting. Accordingly, "in the beginning, I try to be as kind and of course direct as I can". But she notes that "if I believe that they are not listening to me" then she becomes "a bit less patient with them, and maybe in their terms defiant" simply because she needs "to do what's best for me" because "I know what my needs are" (Interviewee 1).

A few co-researchers chose to confront the staff instead of educating them or stating their needs directly. In one instance, a traveler described having to get confrontational when a TSA agent insisted on removing the dog's harness which the traveler contested by stating "Well, you can either go get your supervisor or you can let me stand here and block up the line because I'm not moving over out of the way. I have a plane to catch" (Interviewee 2). Similarly, there were other TSA situations where co-researchers did not think twice about using the aggressive confrontational communication practice. One co-researcher discussed his confrontational approach when TSA agents demanded that he have his assistive devices x-rayed instead of hand-check. He reported that he usually says something like: "Well, I don't have a problem sending it through if

you have six grand in your pocket that you can hand to me,” which often triggers TSA agents to ask “Well, would you like to see a supervisor?” The traveler, in turn, counters with “Sure that'd be great” because the supervisor predictably says “Okay, we'll hand check this.” (Interviewee 44)

A majority of the co-researchers in the above examples and a few others who used the same confrontation practice of involving higher levels of authority indicated that managers seemed to be better-informed about security protocols than the TSA agents themselves. Indeed, the traveler who confronted the TSA agent reported that “The manager came all the way down and thought that guy was an idiot” before agreeing that “you can't make her take the harness off her dog” (Interviewee 6).

With regard to policy issues, being asked to deplane last by flight attendants was another situation where some co-researchers were found to be confrontational in their communication approach. Most co-researchers chose to defy such instructions by flight attendants and deplaned with everybody else. If they needed assistance, they preferred to get down the jetway and wait for the assistant outside. Orbe (1998) suggests that one of the tactics that individuals confronting dominant group members could use would be to contentiously question dominant policies and practices. This was noted in the accounts of co-researchers who spoke about their confrontations with the emergency policies for blind/vision impaired travelers:

It can be an option for the person who is disabled to ask for assistance, but it shouldn't be a policy or rule that says that we must wait because my life's on the line. I want to get the hell out of there. I am not waiting for somebody to come--

What if somebody can't help me? What if I am the only survivor on the flight? I have to be able to manage on my own. (Interviewee 27)

Also, some co-researchers tried to be assertive before they chose to be aggressive. This happened in a situation where a co-researcher was being forced to use wheelchair transport within the airport. In dealing with “a couple of airline people” who had “become very belligerent” this traveler was told “You can't go unless you ride in a wheelchair”. To which the co-researcher responded, “Yes, I can. Go look up section 283 of the air carrier access act and learn the law.” Later adding:

I mean I will get as nasty as they are. I try not to be, but when someone tells me that I cannot go unless I ride in a wheelchair, that's totally unacceptable. It is happened way too often, but I try to be pretty polite about it. I try to make it an educational experience for people. Sometimes, I am successful, and sometimes, not. (Interviewee 21)

Orbe (1998) explains that the likelihood of Co-cultural group members using the confronting practice also may depend on their comfort level. The confrontation approach is more likely to be adopted by those individuals whose personal style in general follows a more aggressive approach in Co-cultural interactions. This notion explains why some co-researchers choose to confront the staff while others prefer educating them patiently for the same issues (e.g. wheelchair issues, exit row policy issues, and service dog issues). One co-researcher's comments in this study further affirms this notion, “I'm the type of person where I'm going to tell them what I need. That is what I'm going to get. Whether they are receptive or not, it is what happens” (Interviewee 10). While a significant number of co-researchers in this study shared using the confrontation practice,

Table 2

Co-cultural Practices and Contextual Definitions

Communication Orientation	Communication Practice	Definitions
Assertive Accommodation	Communicating Self	Simply stating air travel needs, abilities, preferences, and limitations to personnel in an open and direct manner
	Using Liaisons	Seeking assistance and/or support from co-passengers and passer-bys on airports when personnel were unavailable or when feeling discriminated by personnel
	Educating Others	Educating personnel about the appropriate ways to assist
Aggressive Accommodation	Confronting	Making aggressive comments/statements to counter assistance-related issues with personnel
Assertive Assimilation	Rationalizing	Justifying negative assistance-related experiences or discriminatory actions/comments of personnel by offering alternate explanations
	Developing positive face	Establishing rapport with personnel by small talk and politeness to ensure a positive experience
Nonassertive Assimilation	Normalizing for self	Recognizing an assistance-related issue of injustice or indiscrimination but remaining indifferent by normalizing it to the extent that it does not affect the individual

they also shared using more subtle forms of communication practices when situations demanded they do so. These practices fall under the nonassertive assimilation orientation.

Nonassertive assimilation. Co-cultural group members who adopt a nonassertive assimilation communication orientation are interested in blending into the dominant societal structures as smoothly as possible. As a result, they tend to adopt a more inhibited and subtle communicative stance in order to avoid any conflict with dominant group members (Orbe, 1998; Orbe & Spellers, 2005). Co-researchers in this study used nonassertive assimilation orientation when they had travel goals in mind that necessitated the avoidance of conflict. Two communication practices were identified under the nonassertive assimilation communication orientation in this study - developing positive face and normalizing for self.

Developing positive face. Developing positive face refers to communicating with dominant group members in a polite, attentive, and considerate manner (Orbe & Spellers, 2005). In this study, developing positive face translated to blind travelers being friendly, thankful, and reciprocative to personnel assisting them. For instance, a few co-researchers shared feeling a high level of gratitude for receiving good quality services from personnel. While a few co-researchers in this study believed in expressing gratitude through monetary means, others found creative ways to express their appreciation. For instance, one traveler offered a candy to the flight attendants after they joked about offering free drinks for chocolate, saying: “Well, I do not have chocolate and I can't have drinks anyway, but here's one for each of you. Please make sure your colleagues get them and know that this is how much I love them.” Apparently, the flight attendants were

shocked to receive the candy and joked with the passenger for “the whole rest of the flight” because “they thought it was hysterical that I actually gave them my candy” (Interviewee 18).

In addition to expressing gratitude, co-researchers also shared the importance of striking up conversations with the sighted guides. This not only contributed to making the airport experience pleasant for co-researchers themselves but made it enjoyable for the sighted guides as well. For example, Interviewee 33 described an interaction with an assistance provider that centered around sharing information about their respective home towns claiming that “It was a pleasant experience for me because I didn't feel like I was only receiving information, I was giving information as well.”

Developing positive face by expressing empathy towards personnel was also very effective for several co-researchers. Being empathetic allowed co-researchers to place seemingly overworked staff at ease. For instance, one co-researcher who was early to the airport empathized with an overworked staff member by offering some time to finish a task before assisting her. Some co-researchers also discussed the importance of comforting personnel in order to ensure good assistance services for themselves. This was apparent from the traveler who reported, "Being that I'm in the hospitality industry, I know what makes people have a good day. If they are having a miserable day, I will try to make their day better by our conversation. By doing that I will get better treatment” (Interviewee 18).

Co-researchers using the developing positive face practice presented themselves as compassionate, considerate, and respectful individuals who were grateful to personnel who offered good assistance services. They demonstrated qualities of patience,

politeness, and empathy. In practicing developing positive face, co-researchers were able to establish a rapport with the personnel assisting them and were able to make it a mutually enjoyable experience, thereby, avoiding unnecessary arguments and confrontations. Another communication practice by which co-researchers in this study were able to maintain their peace of mind and avoid confrontations involved using the normalizing for self communication practice.

Normalizing for self. The second nonassertive assimilation communication practice represents a novel one identified for the first time in these data. The practice, labeled normalizing for self, refers to recognizing an issue of injustice or discrimination but normalizing it to the extent that it no longer affects the individual identifying it. For some co-researchers, normalizing served as a coping practice, as one co-researcher commented, “When I am in the situation, it's just very frustrating. I am 71. I am getting older. Why spend your life being mad? When I go, I tell myself, Okay, this is going to be an adventure. Goofy stuff is going to happen” (Interviewee 42). Another co-researcher echoed the same sense of normalizing unpleasant air travel experiences by mentally preparing herself ahead of time. In this case, normalizing, works to inoculate her to any negative experiences she might encounter and to dampen the effect they might have.

Every time I leave my house and I expect anxiety, or I go back to the airport and I expect anxiety, and I expect it to be this horrible travel experience, and then I am delightfully surprised when it's the absolute opposite. Then when that happens, I just think, wow, I am very thankful to that person. (Interviewee 1)

For some co-researchers, normalizing came naturally to them as a result of their long-embodied experience with a disability and/or due to their frequent experience with

managing assistance-related travel issues over time. A number of comments made by co-researchers in their discussions of the poor training of staff reflect this notion:

I think this is kind of something that depends on how long you have been visually impaired and how much experience you have with people who have never met a blind person. For me, I went to high school in a very small town and I was the only blind person anyone knew. It does not really bother me I think as much as it may bother some of my blind friends that I know. They will get very irritated and they are like, "How would you not even know that I'm blind?" (Interviewee 6)

For other co-researchers, the practice of normalizing was more intentional. They accepted that their perspectives on negative assistance experiences were simply part of life. For example, Interviewee 29 remarked, "It could be fellow passengers, or it could even be airline personnel. Some people just are not good at verbalizing what they should be telling you to do. But that's just part of life, and you deal with it."

Orbe (1997) states that nonassertive assimilation strategies are most commonly adopted by those Co-cultural group members whose objective or focus is on task production among other things. Many co-researchers in this study were found to normalize assistance-related issues as long as they could effectively meet their travel needs. In this way, normalizing proved utilitarian and instrumental. Some co-researchers used this practice when extra documentation was required by airlines for service dogs. For example, after dealing with the changes in airline policies regarding service dogs, the following co-researcher reported:

I just realized that it might be in my benefit to self-identify when getting tickets. I had been against this previously just because I did not think it should be

something we had to do. I experimented a bit, and I started self-identifying when buying tickets and it has really benefited me since then, as far as just getting better seats, having airlines and agents be much more polite. (Interviewee 7)

Orbe (1998) states that the nonassertive assimilation orientation involves both costs and benefits. In the above example, the co-researcher focused more on getting what she needed to accommodate her guide dog than on the cost of the additional steps required. In doing so, she normalized the costs of assimilating to the airline policies/practices around guide dogs.

From an instrumental standpoint, co-researchers also normalized security-related protocols that did not necessarily make sense to them. Yet they chose to internalize these protocols as part of standard traveling procedure, particularly with regard to security checks. For example, one co-researcher commented on the hand swipes that TSA agents perform every time she travels, saying “It does not hurt me, I don't care. I like, stick out my hand. Sure, wipe my hand. That's fine” (Interviewee 23). Another co-researcher shared a similar feeling about pat-downs, commenting “There is more personal contact than probably I prefer, but again, I have gotten over that, that they're going to touch me and that's fine” (Interviewee 27). Similarly, being forced to use a wheelchair was another common situation where co-researchers chose to normalize the experience rather than problematize it. For example, a co-researcher shared:

I would say at this point it is more practical. I think 20 years ago I would have said that philosophically I don't like being put in a wheelchair but the way life is these days, the way society is I'm just more concerned with getting where I need to be. (Interviewee 47)

Normalizing also surfaced in co-researchers accounts of accessibility-related issues. When asked about the ways in which visually impaired travelers manage inaccessibility of certain airline apps, one co-researcher commented, “I feel I just have gotten to the point where I know how to make my phone accessible enough for me to find that information. I don't notice that the apps are doing anything specific to make that accessible” (Interviewee 14). Another co-researcher added, “Well, you got to go with what you have. I fly XYZ Airlines mostly and the XYZ Airlines app is pretty accessible. So, I'm fortunate that I fly XYZ and that's one of the reasons that I do” (Interviewee 21). Finally, in their discussion of different assistance-related issues, co-researchers used specific words and phrases, which indicated that they had internalized and identified normalizing as part of their identity or personality. This was evident in statements like “I'm reasonably patient so it doesn't particularly annoy me” (Interviewee 11) and “I don't get offended very easily. I am very laid back but there are some people that would be extremely offended by that. I am a flexible person” (Interviewee 30).

Both nonassertive assimilation techniques, developing positive face and normalizing for self, allowed co-researchers to complete their air travel by passively and/or subconsciously overlooking any injustices and/or concerns with assistance services. In contrast, some co-researchers adopted more active and concerted efforts to downplay the perceived injustices so that they could achieve their travel objectives.

Assertive Assimilation. Like nonassertive assimilation, those Co-cultural group members who adopt assertive assimilation orientation strive to downplay Co-cultural differences and attempt to converge into the dominant societal structures but in a more contrived manner (Orbe, 1998). Co-researchers in this study used the communication

practice of rationalization in which they justified their negative air travel experiences to carry on with their travel without any conflicts.

Castlebell, Hopson, Weathers and Ross (2015), who first identified the practice of rationalization in their study, define it as “providing alternative explanation or justification that downplays or diminishes the serious nature of various forms of verbal or nonverbal communicative injustices” committed by dominant group members (p. 3). In this study, rationalization emerged most frequently in co-researchers’ accounts of poorly trained staff. As one co-researcher rationalized staff’s lack of knowledge about the significance of a white cane:

I know that people come from all sorts of backgrounds and they may never have encountered someone, so, I try really hard to be understanding and say, "Oh, no. It is okay. I am blind. Blind people a lot of times have white canes." Things like that. (Interviewee 6)

One reason why the co-researchers in Castlebell et al’s. (2005) study used rationalization was to pardon white people. The authors defined pardoning as co-researchers’ way to excuse white people’s ignorance. In the above example, and several others in this study, co-researchers pardoned personnel for their ignorance rather than holding them accountable. Another comment from a co-researcher with regard to the insistence on being assisted by a wheelchair further affirms this reasoning. “Most people I think that request assistance are elderly. They may have some mobility concerns, so I guess their assumption is it is better to bring it and not need it than to not have it when you need it. I accept that, I understand that” (Interviewee 37).

A second reason why co-researchers in Castlebell et al's. (2005) study used rationalization was due to fear of being labelled as someone playing the race card. "Playing the race card" is a strategy typically employed by individuals of color to leverage arguments, debates, and/or resources based purely on their racial/ethnic background (Martin, 2004). A similar dynamic was evident here when co-researchers feared being labeled for playing the disability card where they were viewed as taking advantage of resources based on their disability status. One co-researcher's comments on bypassing the security line and being shuttled to the front by sighted guides reflects this concern. This traveler understood that assistance providers needed "to get done with me and take the next person" but also recognized that doing so resulted in special treatment that may not have been necessary. "I certainly accept going to the front of the line for their sake. For my own sake, I have no need for it, but I understand why they do it" (Interviewee 9). Another co-researcher rationalized the discriminatory behavior of a sighted guide by justifying it as a cultural difference, saying "They're so poorly paid and I think so often in their countries people with disabilities are basically seen as people who really can't do very much" before adding that "they really need more training and I don't blame them" (Interviewee 42).

The communication practice of rationalization enabled co-researchers to forgive the problematic actions and uninformed behaviors of personnel and to overlook certain systemic and policy concerns that could be construed as unequal or discriminatory. In doing so, rationalization proved to be an effective communication practice for co-researchers to assimilate as regular, non-disruptive travelers.

Table 3

Co-cultural Communication Practices Frequencies

Communication Orientation	Communication Practice	Unique Responses	Total Responses
Assertive Accommodation	Communicating Self	33	91
	Using Liaisons	22	37
	Educating Others	16	32
Aggressive Accommodation	Confronting	21	37
Assertive Assimilation	Rationalizing	16	32
Nonassertive Assimilation	Developing Positive Face	14	22
	Normalizing for Self	24	31

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

General Discussion

The aim of this research study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the air travel experiences of individuals who are blind or visually impaired traveling within the United States. The research study was undertaken to contribute to the growing body of literature available on disability travel. More specifically, the study is a response to Fox et al's (2000) call for more research that builds and authenticates the understandings of interability communication between Co-cultural groups. In this regard, the study demonstrates how air travel offers a rich interability communication landscape to investigate how blind air travelers negotiate difficult air travel situations rife with ableist perspectives and presumptions. The findings of this study identify some overlaps and some departures from previous work on disability travel.

Findings of this study identified a diverse range of disability assistance issues that blind travelers reported experiencing frequently in their air travel. These issues encompassed areas of personnel training, management of disability assistance services, policy-level issues, and issues of physical accessibility. Consistent with past studies on tourism experiences of individuals with disabilities, the findings of this study indicate that blind travelers value the human dimension of assistance services as the most critical aspect of their air travel (Darcy, 2012; Major & Hubbard, 2019; Poria et al. 2011). This is clearly reflected in the fact that personnel training issues were the most frequently and heavily discussed category of assistance-related issues in this study.

Ostrove, Kornfeld and Ibrahim's (2019) study suggested that the ability to provide appropriate help, which supports the autonomy of people with disabilities without patronization or presumption of incompetence, was one of the most important qualities of effective allies. In the current study, personnel offering disability assistance served as allies, and co-researchers similarly expected these allies to ensure autonomy for blind travelers while assisting them. Furthermore, co-researchers expected and demanded mutual respect with personnel in any given disability assistance situation. Axiomatically, some blind travelers in the present study even indicated their willingness to pay extra to travel with airlines that offered respectful treatment and high-quality services. This concurs with Poria et al's. (2010) findings that participants with physical disabilities considered flight experiences as accessible if they felt they were well accepted and respected. Co-researchers in this study shared several travel experiences where they were felt disrespected and discriminated.

The specific discriminatory experiences relating to personnel training issues that blind travelers reported in this study included staff attitudes, disability etiquette, escorting skills, and knowledge about different disabilities. Literature on microaggressions helps explain these discriminatory experiences (Keller & Galgay, 2010; Olkin, Hayward, Abbene & VanHeel, 2019). Microaggressions in the context of Co-cultural theorizing, can be integral to understanding the ways in which dominant group members consciously or unconsciously work to reinforce discriminatory practices against Co-cultural group members (Razzante & Orbe, 2018).

The disability microaggression framework developed by Keller and Galgay (2010) can be utilized to gain a deeper understanding of a majority of the personnel

training issues cited by blind travelers in this study. Originally rooted in the racial discrimination literature, the definition of microaggression was adapted to the disability context as the distorted assumptions and beliefs that fuel negative attitudes and behaviors towards people with disabilities, often expressed in a subtle, secretive and covert manner (Keller & Galgay, 2010). The authors further add that these covert expressions are often outside the awareness of well-intentioned perpetrators. Consistent with this definition, a majority of blind travelers who participated in this study explicitly stated that they thought that most personnel who discriminated against them based on their disability status were well-intentioned individuals who had limited or no experience working with individuals with vision impairment.

The disability microaggression framework offers eight domains of microaggression patterns that serve to interpret individuals' experiences of microaggressions based on their disability status. Most of the personnel training issues that were reported in this study can be classified under four of these eight domains. For instance, Keller and Galgay (2010) explain that the Spread Effect occurs when other expectations about a person are assumed to be due to one specific disability (e.g. talking loudly with a blind individual because one assumes that the person's hearing is also impaired). Instances where staff communicated with the accompanier instead of the blind traveler directly and offered wheelchair assistance to blind travelers despite contrary requests are two key patterns that coincide with the "Spread Effect".

Three other microaggression domains in the framework including Infantilization, Patronization, and Helplessness also clearly correspond with the personnel training issues revealed in this study. "Infantilization" occurs when a person with a disability is treated

like a child, “Patronization” occurs when a person with a disability is praised for almost anything, and “Helplessness” occurs when people frantically try to help people with disabilities (Keller & Galgay 2010, p. 249). Several co-researchers, as discussed in the findings of RQ1 reported experiences of infantilization, patronization and helplessness with certain personnel who assisted them.

In addition to the personnel training issues, some of the systemic, policy, and physical accessibility issues also overlap with the findings of previous studies that examined the experiences of disabled travelers and tourists (Darcy, 2012; Major & Hubbard, 2019; Poria et al., 2011). Some of these issues include uncertainty with gate change announcements, inaccessible flight information display boards, inaccessible in-flight entertainment systems, and excessive wait time to receive assistance. It is noteworthy that after almost a decade since the most recent study on traveling with a vision disability (Poria et al., 2011), these issues remain intact for many blind travelers as indicated by the findings of the present study.

The present study also highlights specific findings that diverge from the outcomes of previous work. Poria et al. (2011) study is the only other study in the literature that specifically examines the air travel experiences, in addition to art museum and hotel stay experiences, of visually impaired individuals. Contrary to Poria et al.’s (2011) study, blind travelers in the present study expressed comfort and in some cases preference to travel independently without a companion. Many blind travelers even expressed their preference to navigate airports without assistance from personnel should they have access to maps of airport layouts in accessible formats or remote human assistance through phone cameras or smart glasses.

Additionally, blind travelers in the present study did not prefer to deplane last. A majority of them found it more convenient to deplane with everyone else and wait for assistance at the concourse. While some simply did not like the idea of waiting in the confines of an aircraft, others viewed the instructions to wait for an assistant as inequitable treatment. Furthermore, blind travelers in the present study pointed to a range of issues related to the handling and treatment of their guide dogs which was not extensively discussed in any of the previous studies on disability tourism. Indeed, the two most heavily discussed issues in the current study were TSA agents' improper handling of guide dogs and the requirement for additional documentation to aid in distinguishing guide dogs from emotional support animals.

Aside from identifying the disability assistance issues experienced by blind travelers, the present study also sought to understand how blind travelers communicatively manage these issues. The study utilized a Co-cultural theoretical framework to examine co-researchers' communication strategies (Orbe, 1998). One of the most noteworthy findings was that none of the co-researchers in this study preferred the separation outcomes (Orbe 1998) and therefore, did not use tactics that related to assertive, nonassertive, or aggressive separation communication orientations. It can be inferred from this finding that blind travelers in this study did not endorse ignoring instances of discrimination (e.g. avoiding) or believe in taking any extreme steps that involved attacking personnel (e.g. sabotaging others). Rather they prefer to transform the system in a way that became more inclusive of their own travel needs and preferences.

The examination of the different communication orientations and practices that blind travelers use to manage air travel issues revealed that they typically prefer the

accommodation outcome (see Table 2). This suggests that co-researchers prefer to change the ableist practices and policies related to disability assistance by adopting assertive and aggressive communication approaches. When their field of experience with their blindness along with their physical abilities allowed, and when the situations were appropriate and the perceived costs and benefits were acceptable, blind travelers in this study made concerted communication efforts to have their own specific travel needs and preferences integrated into the system through the accommodation tactics of communicating self, using liaisons, educating others, and confronting. These findings indicate a departure from Yau et al.'s (2004) study that explored the tourism experiences of individuals with mobility and vision disabilities. Participants in that study indicated their willingness to compromise and forgo situations of exclusions with acceptance and humor in order to become "travel active." Yau et al. (2004) define travel active individuals as individuals with disabilities who assess their options, "negotiate environmental barriers and capitalize on environmental facilitators" in order to efficiently plan and organize their travel (p. 947)

Theoretical Implications

The present study advances the application of Co-cultural theory in a relatively understudied Co-cultural group of individuals with disabilities (Cohen & Avanzino, 2010) and extends it into the transportation context. The study demonstrates how blind air travelers assume Co-cultural positioning in air travel contexts particularly when they receive assistance services from personnel. Their assistance-related experiences illustrate how personnel offering the assistance (un)consciously assume the dominant position and how this eventually leads to power differences where the needs and preferences of blind

travelers get suppressed. Thus, Co-cultural theory served as a useful framework to focus on the lived experiences of blind air travelers offering useful insights into the ways in which they negotiate discriminatory air travel policies and practices.

The study findings corroborate the basic framework of the six interrelated factors on which Co-cultural theory was built (Orbe 1998; Orbe & Spellers, 2005). In particular, the blind travelers' accounts indicate that their choice of communication orientations and practices were predominantly dictated by the particular air travel situational context, the perceived costs and benefits of negotiating with personnel regarding their travel goals, and their abilities vis-à-vis their visual impairment — as well as how long they have had the disability, how long they have been traveling independently, or both.

In addition to finding support for the recently identified communication practice of rationalization (Castlebell et al., 2015), the present study also expands upon Co-cultural theory by identifying a new communication practice termed Normalizing for Self. Cited by more than half of the co-researchers, Normalizing for Self was placed under the nonassertive assimilation communication orientation. Orbe and Spellers (2005) explain that Co-cultural group members who strive to downplay Co-cultural differences and blend in the dominant societal structures adopt the nonassertive assimilation stance. The findings of this study demonstrate that in certain situations, blind travelers tended to blend in with the current disability assistance system with all the flaws as reported in this study instead of addressing the assistance issues explicitly. In doing so, co-researchers in this study seemingly have become immune to issues that they experienced and remained unaffected by them.

Both the novel communication practice of normalizing for self and the co-researchers' tendency to adopt an assertive accommodation orientation in most air travel situations can be further understood within the framework of the Social Cognitive Model of Responses to Stigma (Watson & Larson, 2006; Watson & River, 2005). According to the model, people with disabilities can respond to stigma or discrimination in one of three ways: self-stigma, empowerment/righteous anger, and indifference. Self-stigma refers to the internalization and acceptance of stereotypes that the public holds against certain groups, results in self-deprecation and lowered sense of self-esteem.

Empowerment/righteous anger involves the responses stigmatized individuals take to feel empowered and motivated to fight against discrimination and to change oppressive systems. Indifference is a response characterized by demoralization and withdrawal whereby people remain unaffected by discriminatory or stigmatizing behavior.

The model also identifies three factors that determine what response an individual is likely to choose in situations of perceived or experienced stigmatization. The first factor is group identification, which refers to how strongly an individual identifies with a stigmatized group of people (i.e., individuals with vision disabilities in this case). The second factor, perceived legitimacy of discrimination, concerns whether or not an individual perceives the stigma or discrimination to be legitimate. The third factor, contingencies of self-worth, considers the degree to which discriminatory acts or stigma affect the domains upon which individuals base their self-esteem (i.e., contingencies of self-worth). Thus, in some situations, individuals with disabilities may experience a decrease in self-esteem due to stigma while in others they may respond with indignation (Watson & Larson, 2006).

Applying the basic tenets of this model to the findings of the present study, individuals responding with assertive accommodation strategies correspond with those using the empowerment/righteous anger strategy. Watson and Larson (2006) explain that the empowerment/righteous anger response gets evoked when individuals identify closely with the stigmatized group but consider the stigma to be illegitimate. These individuals are likely to be active in group advocacy and empowerment efforts to receive better services and opportunities. Advocacy and empowerment efforts were evident in the present study among blind travelers' who used communication practices such as communicating self, educating others, and confronting for ensuring that they received fair and equitable disability assistance services.

Similarly, the new communication practice of Normalizing for Self identified in this study resembles the response of indifference in which the discriminated individual remains unaffected with the stigma whether or not he or she perceives it as legitimate. Watson and Larson (2006) explain that individuals may remain indifferent when they do not identify themselves with stigmatized groups. Their self-esteem is unaffected since they perceive disability stigma attached to that group as irrelevant in defining their identity. As a result, they remain withdrawn and do not take any direct action to address the discriminatory act.

In the context of the present study, blind travelers who used the Normalizing for Self communication practice were found to be strong, confident individuals who maintained a high sense of self-esteem regardless of the discriminatory behaviors they experienced. They did not identify themselves or their feelings as similar to fellow blind travelers. Rather they chose to simply normalize discrimination by immunizing

themselves against it, instead of internalizing self-stigma or speaking up against discrimination via empowerment/righteous anger.

Overall, locating the additional interpretations of the discriminatory behaviors of personnel within the microaggression literature and situating the communication approaches blind travelers use to manage disability assistance issues within the social-cognitive model of responses to stigma enhance our understandings of the Co-cultural theoretical framework. To that end, the theoretical implications of this study augment the explanatory power and heuristic merit of Co-cultural theory (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011; Tracy, 2010).

Practical Implications and Recommendations

The present study contributes to the growing body of tourism literature that explores the unique air travel experiences of individuals with visual disabilities. More importantly, the study is the first to offer useful insights into the lived experiences of blind air travelers from a communication standpoint. Thereby, the study makes important contributions to applied, interdisciplinary communication research. The findings of this study indicate that the Air Carrier Access Act of 1986 (ACAA) has not been sufficiently effective in meeting its intended purpose with regard to protecting the travel rights of individuals with vision disabilities.

More importantly, the disability assistance issues experienced by blind travelers and the communication practices used by them to manage these issues call for the urgent attention of airport and airline management professionals and policy makers. Several disability policies and practices could be modified or enforced more consistently so that they are conducive to the needs and abilities of blind travelers. In this regard, the present

study outlines several recommendations in subsequent paragraphs. Directly based upon the lived experiences reported by blind travelers, these recommendations are offered in relation to Title 14 part 382 of the Code of Federal Regulations (14 C.F.R. part 382), developed by the Department of Transportation (DOT) responsible to enforce the principles of the ACAA. 14 C.F.R. part 382 is divided into 11 subparts (A through K), with each subpart further divided into sections (running from 1 to 159) that cover different aspects of disability travel. It also includes two appendices – Appendix A (Reports of Disability-related Complaints Data) and Appendix B (Cross Reference Table).

The first recommendation relates to the issue of staff's tendency to homogenize the needs of travelers across different disabilities. 14 C.F.R. § 382.141 (Subpart J) requires airlines to train personnel with respect to awareness and appropriate responses to passengers with a disability including persons with physical, sensory, mental and emotional disabilities and to emphasize how to distinguish among the differing abilities of individuals with any of these disabilities. Communicating with a blind traveler's companion instead of directly with the blind traveler, insistence on wheelchair assistance when it is not needed, and persistently holding boarding passes/tickets without travelers' consent are a few examples from this research that illustrate personnel failures to make such distinctions. Regardless of whether personnel are merely uncomfortable talking directly to blind travelers or are simply failing to make distinctions between blindness and other types of disabilities, the study findings clearly indicate a gap in the training of staff regarding how to effectively and appropriately communicate with blind travelers.

While the requirement stated above under Subpart J addresses the issue of homogenization, it does not offer any specific steps for air carriers to implement this requirement other than consulting with organizations representing individuals with disabilities. In this regard, a host of opportunities abound. Foremost, airlines have an opportunity to revisit their online booking system. Online booking systems that offer a designated space for individuals to request their specific assistance needs, with open-ended questions is a valuable addition to the current standard means of checking boxes. This is particularly relevant because vision disability exists on a spectrum. With the type and severity of one's vision loss, an individual's needs may vary significantly. For example, someone who has partial loss of sight may be able to follow a sighted guide visually without holding the arm compared to someone who is completely blind or someone who uses a guide dog. On the other hand, a vision impaired individual may have additional health conditions that could necessitate the use of wheelchair. Therefore, ensuring that there is a descriptive space in the airline booking system to request these needs will be very useful to many passengers with a vision disability.

Furthermore, accessing this information in advance of travel will prove effective in assuring that staff are able to provide the requested assistance without transgressing to over-assisting. Additionally, as part of their assistance protocols, airlines could consider mandating staff to ask about the specific assistance preferences of travelers in situations when travelers have not made assistance requests in advance. Including content in the training modules that teach how to appropriately ask for this information will help personnel become more comfortable and attuned to the specific needs of blind travelers.

With regard to 14 C.F.R. § 382.141 (Subpart J) that encourages airlines to consult with organizations representing individuals with disabilities, some airlines are already working in this direction by means of disability advisory boards. These boards are comprised of travelers living with disabilities who regularly review airline policies, practices, and training materials (e.g. United Airline’s Accessible Travel Advisory Board and Delta Airline’s Advisory Board on Disability). Expanding further on these efforts, airlines may consider creating short surveys for their travelers with disabilities soliciting feedback about their travel experiences after each flight to identify problem areas. And, in turn, sharing those data routinely with advisory boards. Airlines also could consider employing special assistance trainers. That is, individuals from the blind community, as well as mobility instructors who train blind individuals on how to navigate with a white cane.

In addition, creating educational materials on the types and functions of mobility aids and assistive devices commonly used by vision-impaired individuals could help staff increase their overall awareness about traveling with a vision disability, which could also increase their capacity to make distinctions from other kinds of disabilities. Finally, it is critical for training instructors to create a learning environment where personnel can openly ask and candidly discuss their specific apprehension or difficulty when communicating with blind travelers.

One of the more nuanced findings of this study was that blind co-researchers found it very challenging to communicate their needs and preferences to sighted guides who do not speak English well. As explained in the results chapter, language barriers have significantly more serious implications for blind travelers than travelers with other

types of physical disabilities (e.g. mobility or hearing). Thus, airlines can develop systems that enable them to assign personnel based upon the specific disability and/or specific needs requested by blind travelers ahead of time. At a minimum, ensuring that any blind traveler who requests disability assistance gets assigned a sighted guide who speaks the same native language as the traveler will be very helpful.

Furthermore, 14 C.F.R. § 382.111 (Subpart H) requires air carriers to train flight attendants on how to assist travelers with disabilities in tasks such as opening meal packages and identifying food items. Such assistance is required under this section only when a request is made by or on behalf of a passenger with a disability, or when offered by an air carrier and accepted by a passenger with a disability. Some blind travelers in this study reported feeling humiliated by flight attendants who offered them children's cups for serving beverages. Others complained about being skipped during meal services because of a lack of eye contact. To draw their attention during meal services, some co-researchers preferred being called out by name by flight attendants, whereas others simply preferred being tapped on the shoulder. More emphasis on the training of flight attendants regarding how to effectively communicate with travelers with vision disabilities is needed. For instance, flight attendants could solicit travelers' communication and serving preferences ahead of time instead of using their best judgment about how passengers would like to be served and how much assistance they would require.

14 C.F.R. § 382.81 (Subpart F) and 14 C.F.R. § 382.117 (Subpart H) clearly state that airlines must provide either a bulkhead seat, or a seat other than a bulkhead seat based on a passenger's request, for those traveling with a service animal. Several blind

travelers pointed to flight attendants' misconception regarding the policy mandating that guide dog users sit in bulkhead seats. More efforts in flight attendant's initial, and recurrent training to ensure that flight attendants are educated about this regulation requirement will be valuable.

Additionally, co-researchers in this study expressed feeling discriminated on the prohibition to sit in the exit row. The Federal Aviation regulations under 14 C.F.R. § 121.585 (Subpart T) entitle personnel to determine if a person is likely to perform the functions listed in the regulations, and to disallow those who seem unlikely to be able to perform these functions at their discretion. This section offers several factors to consider while making a determination about a passenger's capacity to sit in the exit row. Two of these factors that are relevant to blind travelers include (a) the person lacks the visual capacity to perform emergency protocols listed under the regulation without the assistance of visual aids beyond contact lenses and eyeglasses, and (b) the person lacks the ability to read and understand emergency evacuation instructions in printed or graphic forms or the ability to understand oral crew commands. Flight attendants can take the opportunity to educate blind travelers who express dissent about being prohibited from sitting in the exit row. Beyond this, the Federal Aviation Administration could consider offering a platform where blind travelers can express and have an open dialogue about the existing regulations that they perceive to be discriminatory.

Another significant issue that co-researchers shared concerned the increasing suspicion and demand of airlines to prove the legitimacy of service dogs. This has been a longstanding and ongoing issue that has gained more attention in recent years. Co-researchers in this study attributed the increased suspicion of airlines towards service

dogs to their inability to distinguish between Emotional Support Animals (ESAs) and service dogs. DOT recently published a notice of proposed rule making (Traveling by Air with Service Animals, 2020) regarding service animals on February 5, 2020 in the Federal register and invited comments from the public on the proposed changes to the current regulations under 14 C.F.R. part 382. Among several proposed changes, the key one pertains to issues relating to service animals, also raised by co-researchers in this study, and concerned changing the definition of service animals to align with the definition issued by the Department of Justice implementing the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The ACAA's current definition of service animals as defined in 14 C.F.R. part 382 includes Emotional Support Animals. However, the proposed change in the NPRM will restrict the definition of service animals to service dogs only.

In addition to the burden of carrying extra documentation to alleviate airline personnel's suspicion, co-researchers were also perturbed by the attitude and rudeness of personnel and airline booking agents regarding this issue. The current provisions under 14 C.F.R. part 382, and the airline policies of United, Delta, Southwest and American airlines require documentation for only Emotional Service Animals for flights under eight hours. Yet the airlines' inability to sufficiently train personnel to make these distinctions and to communicate effectively with blind travelers about their guide dogs was a concern for many co-researchers.

14 C.F.R. § 382.117 (Subpart H) requires airlines to ask for documentation for service animals only if a flight segment is scheduled to take eight hours or more. In addition, this section lists acceptable forms of evidence that an animal is indeed a service animal, which includes the "credible verbal assurance of a qualified individual with a

disability using the animal.” Of the four airlines (United, Delta, Southwest, and American), only Southwest mentions evidence of credible verbal assurance on their webpage. Improved training materials could place emphasis on this list of acceptable forms of evidence. In particular, airlines could educate staff on what constitutes “credible verbal assurance” since this is not defined in the regulations and offer communication training on how to respectfully solicit “credible verbal assurance” from guide dog users. Such training efforts will help in mitigating the apprehensions and frustrations surrounding guide dog requirements for both, personnel, and blind travelers.

The training of TSA agents was also a major concern for several blind travelers in this study. The findings suggest that TSA agents are not trained appropriately and consistently across airports regarding the proper handling of guide dogs or white canes. Blind travelers also indicated their apprehension about being signaled out unnecessarily for pat-downs and hand swipes. 14 C.F.R. § 382.55 (Subpart D) entitles TSA agents to administer additional security screenings in the same manner as other travelers only if the traveler with a disability using an assistive aid or device activates a security system. Steps to include special training modules that prepare TSA agents for how to adequately explain the reasons for performing additional security screenings (e.g. hand swipes, pat-downs) with blind travelers are warranted. Additionally, such modules could also include training on how to effectively describe to blind travelers what each screening procedure entails before performing it. These steps will enable blind travelers to feel more comfortable and less apprehensive/anxious about screening procedures. Training TSA agents on the step-by-step procedures for how to properly screen service dogs is also critical.

Additionally, several blind travelers in this study commented that the issue of understaffed airports resulted in overworked personnel who were reluctant to stop at restrooms or restaurants when aiding them. The requirements under 14 C.F.R. § 382.91 (Subpart G) indicate that air carriers are mandated to have personnel make brief stops at restrooms upon a traveler's request only if the restroom is on the route to the destination of the enplaning, deplaning or connecting assistance without causing unreasonable delay. This rule calls for consideration and revision; the stipulation that restrooms be on route and avoid unreasonable delays interferes with basic human needs. One way to address this issue could involve building more time into staff's work schedules so that assisting each traveler can include food and restroom stopovers. A related recommendation, based on co-researchers' experiences of accessing airport restrooms, is to train personnel how to adequately describe layouts of different airport spaces including restroom layouts. This recommendation is particularly important given the wide variation in how airports are designed.

Some co-researchers reported not having access to escort assistance for restrooms and restaurants in situations where flight delays or gate changes occurred. Provision of assistance in situations that require gate changes or result in flight delays are not directly addressed in the existing regulations of 14 C.F.R. part 382, which signals a need for revisions to include such provisions. Air carriers could develop systems that alert assistance providers via real-time notifications of any gate changes and/or flight delays. Doing so will benefit blind travelers who may need additional assistance when these circumstances arise.

Furthermore, blind travelers in this study indicated that the current system of airport assistance services does not uniformly cater to individuals who need curbside assistance, baggage claim assistance, and/or aid regarding gate changes. 14 C.F.R. § 382.91 Subpart G) requires air carriers to make such provisions for travelers with disabilities upon request. However, based on blind travelers' accounts in this study, the requirement is not consistently enforced, particularly with regard to curbside assistance at the entrance of the airport. Of the four airlines referred to by co-researchers in this study, only Southwest specifically acknowledges on its website that curbside check-in is not available in all airports or at all hours of operation. Southwest asks customers or someone acting on behalf of the customer to enter the terminal to request assistance for the customer ("Assistance in the Airport and with Boarding," n.d., "Curbside assistance," para. 6). This calls for additional services to be added in the system. For instance, airlines can offer a contact number to blind travelers should they need assistance for certain aspects of their air travel. This could be easily implemented as a built-in feature of the airline app or could be offered when a vision impaired traveler books a flight.

Additionally, a majority of co-researchers noted the issue of delayed assistance as one of the most difficult aspects of their air travel experience, resulting in having to wait long periods of time before receiving assistance at airports. 14 C.F.R. § 382.27 Subpart B) requires air carriers to ensure that their reservations and other administrative systems clearly and effectively communicate the notice of all accommodation requests made in advance (within the time period stipulated by airlines) to all personnel responsible for providing the requested accommodations and/or services. A significant number of co-

researchers shared that they stopped giving advance notice because they were made to wait regardless of providing advance notice of accommodation requests.

As suggested above, airlines can consider establishing or restructuring current systems, both technical and managerial, so that the systems ensure the effective and timely dissemination of assistance preferences specified by travelers with vision disabilities during flight booking to personnel at each and every point of travel. This includes curbside airport pickup, security screenings, departing flight gates, connecting gates, baggage claim, and ground transportation drop-off points. Airlines could also revisit and assess any understaffing issues that may be contributing to longer wait times for individuals with disabilities. Setting specific limits to the maximum wait time for passengers within which assistance should be delivered will also be an effective measure to enforce the guidelines under Subpart B.

There is tremendous variability regarding the accessibility of different air travel elements including ticketing kiosks. Some of these are being made accessible more recently in compliance with 14 C.F.R. §382.57 (Subpart D) that requires air carriers make at least 25% of all kiosks installed on or after December 12, 2016 accessible by 2022. Given co-researchers accounts of their inability to easily locate different areas within the airport without assistance, air carriers could explore ways to geolocate these kiosks for blind travelers. One way to implement this is to offer the location and indoor navigation steps for accessible kiosks in the airline mobile app and on the website. This information can also be made available by calling on their helpline or by asking personnel at the airport. To make this effective, airlines would need to ensure that helpline agents be well-trained in terms of offering good verbal directions to accessible kiosks. Additionally, as

reflected in a few co-researchers' accounts, a potential alternative to accessible kiosks and escort services could be implemented if air carriers or airport authorities offered blind travelers free access to the latest human-assisted, real-time indoor navigation services that generally work on monthly or annual subscriptions.

14 C.F.R. § 382.43 (Subpart C) encourages air carriers to test the accessibility and usability of their primary websites in consultation with individuals with disabilities. Co-researchers in this study indicated that while airline websites may be accessible, they are not necessarily usable for users of screen readers. Co-researchers reported relying on their friends/family members to make reservations. This was because they spent significantly more time navigating different reservation elements of those websites compared to their sighted counterparts and compared to navigating other websites. It is important for developers to distinguish between screen reader compatibility and equitable user-experience. For instance, shifting focus from how to simply make websites compatible with assistive technology to seeking feedback for how to optimize websites for best use with assistive technology is an effective approach in addressing this issue.

Finally, 14 C.F.R. § 382.159 Subpart K) makes provisions for individuals with disabilities to file informal complaints (to the DOT's Aviation Consumer Protection Division) and formal complaints (as applicable under the procedures of 14 C.F.R part 302) if they feel that an air carrier has violated any aspect of the regulation within six months of their travel experience. The communication practices (Orbe, 1998) of communicating self, educating others, using liaisons, and confronting indicate that blind travelers likely try to solve issues through accommodation outcomes or ignore them through assimilation outcomes. Accordingly, they may not necessarily report any

complaints officially under Subpart K. Therefore, the actual disability-related complaints compiled by the Department of Transportation may not fully represent the experiences of blind travelers. A secondary method to solicit disability-related negative experiences of blind travelers is worthwhile to consider for gaining a more holistic understanding of the gaps in the current disability assistance systems.

Limitations and Future Directions

The present study offers valuable insights regarding the air travel experiences of travelers with vision disabilities. However, the study also holds certain limitations that need to be acknowledged as well as accounted for in future studies. First, the study draws from the memory of the blind travelers lived experiences. While some participants had traveled very recently relative to the time interviews were conducted, others were recounting experiences that had occurred months earlier. This may have affected how they recalled their specific air travel experiences in retrospect and what they considered salient about the issues they discussed (Lautterbach, 2018). However, it should be noted that co-researchers did not indicate any difficulties in recalling specific situations, implying that air travel issues remain memorable to this population who in turn are capable of recounting those experiences readily. Lautterbach (2018) in her phenomenological study of teachers of students with learning disabilities demonstrates application of three different interview formats (i.e. “think-aloud”, stimulated recall, and semi-structured interviews) to help teachers engage in the phenomenon in ways that do not rely on memory and reflection alone. Future studies may address the issue of recollection from memory by adopting these interview techniques or by following other qualitative methods including ethnographic approaches that allow for personal

observations and focus groups that can facilitate accurate recollection of specific incidents related to the research topic.

Second, it became evident from the first few interviews that some co-researchers traveled to more or less the same set of destinations, whereas others traveled far and wide. The variation in travel also may affect how they account for their assistance-related experiences. For instance, blind travelers who travel to the same airports several times may be able to develop a mental map of the airport layout and as a result feel less anxious if they experience any assistance-related issues. On the contrary, traveling to unfamiliar airports without sight and without appropriate assistance may add to the anxiety of blind travelers. Furthermore, some co-researchers preferred to travel on the same airline because of their positive experiences while others indicated traveling on multiple different airlines. This may have affected their accounts of travel experiences as well. A conscious effort was made in the interviews conducted with co-researchers to solicit information about such travel patterns. However, the presence or absence of such variability did not surface readily across interviews with all 42 co-researchers.

A third limitation is that the length and nature of vision impairment varied among co-researchers. It is well-documented in the disability literature that individuals with acquired disabilities adapt and adjust significantly differently than individuals who had congenital disabilities (Bogart, 2014; Braithwaite, 1990; Li & Moore, 1998). In the context of the present study, this could imply that their travel experiences also varied based on these factors. Furthermore, co-researchers used either a white cane or guide dog in their air travel, thus making their disability visible to assistance providers. Literature suggests that the assistance experiences of individuals with disabilities vary significantly

based on the visibility of their disability (Braithwaite & Ecksteen, 2003; Braithwaite & Japp, 2005). There is very limited literature on the air travel experiences of individuals with invisible disabilities including those with low vision who do not use any assistive aids or devices but still request travel assistance. More work needs to be done in the area of invisible disabilities and air travel in future studies to address these variations.

Finally, the social and cultural understandings of disability may affect how these co-researchers responded to discriminatory assistance practices and policies. A study by Yau et al. (2004) suggests that individuals belonging to collectivist cultures find it hard to solicit help outside of their family. This is because individuals from collectivist cultures seeking help outside one's family can undermine their self-reliance or create burden/problems for strangers offering assistance. This was not a consideration in the present study but may have been an influence. Future studies should consider examining how cross-cultural differences in air travel experiences for people with disabilities may shape perceptions of discriminatory practices and policies.

Given that blind travelers sometimes tolerate ableist disability assistance policies and practices by pursuing assimilation outcomes, it may be worthwhile to understand the socio-psychological impact of engaging in assimilation-related communication practices. While these findings suggest that assimilation practices served as a means for blind travelers to ensure smooth travel without any unnecessary conflict, the potential negative long-term effects on the self-concept of blind travelers who use specific communication practices (i.e., rationalization and normalizing for self) warrants further scholarly attention.

Additionally, the study identified a new communication practice called Normalizing for Self. Future work can delve deeper into identifying and examining this practice in air travel, as well as other interability communication contexts, with individuals who have physical or intellectual disabilities. From a methodological standpoint, future studies can use ethnographic approaches and focus groups to delineate the reasons for choosing this tactic and the specific situations in which normalizing is regarded as the most preferred Co-cultural communication practice.

Given the unprecedented times of the COVID-19 pandemic that developed at the time of writing this dissertation, a follow-up study can be undertaken to examine the impact of the pandemic on air travel for blind individuals. Participants in a recent survey, conducted by AIRA to examine and address the impact of COVID-19 on blind and vision impaired community, indicated that following the social distancing rule of keeping six feet apart in public settings was particularly challenging without visual cues (Flewelein, Flewelein, Otillion & Dabney, 2020). In addition, touch, and tactile exchanges, which constitute an integral aspect of functioning with vision disability, were reported to be particularly risky by participants (Flewelein et al., 2020). It would be valuable to conduct a study that examines how the needs and preferences of co-researchers discussed in this study change or evolve in light of safety restrictions and health guidelines being instituted. Additionally, it would also be critical to examine the opinions and apprehensions of personnel who assist blind travelers given the close proximity and touch involved in serving as sighted guides.

Future work can also examine the experiences and perspectives of personnel and policy makers in the delivery of assistance services for travelers with vision disabilities.

Dominant Group Theory seeks to understand how dominant group members interact with Co-cultural group members within dominant societal structures and investigates the ways in which dominant group members use their privilege to “consciously dismantle oppressive structures” and/or “unconsciously reinforce oppressive structures” (Razzante & Orbe, 2018, p. 369). This could provide interesting insights into how policies and practices that unknowingly prove problematic get deployed and executed. Working with the findings of this study, interview questions can be developed to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which dominant group members (personnel and policy makers) work to reinforce or challenge the discriminatory practices experienced by blind air travelers.

Conclusions

The basic premise of the present study was that assistance-related situations between people with and without disabilities are one of the most challenging communication situations (Braithwaite & Labrecque, 1994; Soule & Roloff, 2000). Extending this premise to the air transportation context, the present study was undertaken with the primary intent of gaining a holistic understanding of the air travel experiences of individuals with vision impairments who travel independently and make use of disability assistance services. Co-cultural theory suggests that Co-cultural group members, including people with disabilities, develop their communication strategies to negotiate their cultural identities with others that are both like and unlike themselves (Orbe, 1998; Orbe & Spellers, 2005). The present study used this theoretical framework to identify how individuals with vision disabilities communicate with airport/airline personnel and co-travelers to navigate their air travel experiences.

Overall, the study advances our understanding of traveling with a vision disability through the lived experiences, described in their own words, of visually impaired individuals. The study illustrates that the underexplored area of air travel and vision disability is rife with communication challenges and complexities that visually impaired travelers experience with regularity. This analysis demonstrates that air travel for those with vision disabilities, complicates conceptions of (in)effective offering and receiving of disability assistance — which bear practical, theoretical, and psychosocial implications. Co-researchers’ travel experiences ranging from “exceptional” to “extremely humiliating” demonstrate the lack of consistency in knowledge, awareness, and policy implementation across airports and airlines. The study also highlights the variability in vision impaired travelers’ abilities and communication preferences when it comes to receiving assistance.

The findings, thus, challenge our monolithic assumptions about the needs of people with disabilities and calls for more empathy, sensitization, and awareness from providers of assistance. The findings also place responsibility on vision impaired travelers to communicate their specific needs in an open, authentic, and respectful manner. It is my hope that the insights and recommendations offered through this study will be useful to both, vision impaired travelers and the air travel industry, and will ultimately contribute to advancing a more equitable, dignified, and pleasurable air travel experience for those who are blind or vision impaired.

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APPENDIX A

CO-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION PRACTICES And ORIENTATIONS

Co-cultural Communicative Practices Summary (Orbe, 1998, p. 16)

Practice	Brief Description
Emphasizing commonalities	Focusing on human similarities while downplaying or ignoring Co-cultural differences
Developing positive face	Assuming a gracious communicator stance in which one is more considerate, polite, and attentive to dominant group members
Censoring self	Remaining silent when comments from dominant group members are inappropriate, indirectly insulting, or highly offensive
Averting controversy	Averting communication away from controversial or potentially dangerous subject areas
Extensive preparation	Engaging in an extensive amount of detailed (mental or concrete) groundwork prior to interactions with dominant group members
Overcompensating	Conscious attempts—consistently employed in response to a pervasive fear of discrimination—to become a "superstar"
Manipulating stereotypes	Conforming to commonly accepted beliefs about group members as a strategic means to exploit them for personal gain
Bargaining	Striking a covert or overt arrangement with dominant group members in which both parties agree to ignore Co-cultural differences
Dissociating	Making a concerted effort to elude any connection with behaviors typically associated with one's Co-cultural group
Mirroring	Adopting dominant group codes in attempts to make one's Co-cultural identity less (or totally not) visible
Strategic distancing	Avoiding any association with other Co-cultural group members in attempts to be perceived as a distinct individual
Ridiculing self	Invoking or participating in discourse, either passively or actively, which is demeaning to Co-cultural group members
Increasing visibility	Covertly, yet strategically, maintaining a Co-cultural presence within dominant structures

Dispelling stereotypes	Myths of generalized group characteristics and behaviors are countered through the process of just being oneself
Communicating self	Interacting with dominant group members in an authentic, open, and genuine manner; used by those with strong self-concepts
Intragroup networking	Identifying and working with other Co-cultural group members who share common philosophies, convictions, and goals
Using liaisons	Identifying specific dominant group members who can be trusted for support, guidance, and assistance
Educating others	Taking the role of teacher in Co-cultural interactions; enlightening dominant group members of Co-cultural norms, values, and so forth
Confronting	Using the necessary aggressive methods, including ones that seemingly violate the "rights" of others, to assert one's voice
Gaining advantage	Inserting references to Co-cultural oppression to provoke dominant group reactions and gain advantage
Avoiding	Maintaining a distance from dominant group members; refraining from activities and/or locations where interaction is likely
Maintaining barriers	Imposing, through the use of verbal and nonverbal cues, a psychological distance from dominant group members
Exemplifying strengths	Promoting the recognition of Co-cultural group strengths, past accomplishments, and contributions to society
Embracing stereotypes	Applying a negotiated reading to dominant group perceptions and merging them into a positive Co-cultural self-concept
Attacking	Inflicting psychological pain through personal attacks on dominant group members' self-concept
Sabotaging others	Undermining the ability of dominant group members to take full advantage of their privilege inherent in dominant structures

Co-cultural Communication Orientations (Orbe, 1998, p. 110)

	Separation	Accommodation	Assimilation
Nonassertive	<p>Avoiding</p> <p>Maintaining interpersonal barriers</p>	<p>Increasing visibility</p> <p>Dispelling stereotypes</p>	<p>Emphasizing commonalities</p> <p>Developing positive face</p> <p>Censoring self</p> <p>Averting controversy</p>
Assertive	<p>Communicating self</p> <p>Intragroup networking</p> <p>Exemplifying strengths</p> <p>Embracing stereotypes</p>	<p>Communicating self</p> <p>Intragroup networking</p> <p>Using liaisons</p> <p>Educating others</p>	<p>Extensive preparation</p> <p>Overcompensating</p> <p>Manipulating stereotypes</p> <p>Bargaining</p>
Aggressive	<p>Attacking</p> <p>Sabotaging others</p>	<p>Confronting</p> <p>Gaining advantage</p>	<p>Dissociating</p> <p>Mirroring</p> <p>Strategic Distancing</p> <p>Ridiculing Self</p>

APPENDIX B

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DOCUMENTS

Study Approval Letter
EXEMPTION GRANTED

Jeffrey Kassing

Social and Behavioral Sciences, School of (SSBS)

602/543-6631

jkassing@asu.edu

Dear Jeffrey Kassing:

On 11/13/2018 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	Examining the Perspectives and Communicative Experiences of Individuals with Vision Disabilities in Air Travel Contexts
Investigator:	Jeffrey Kassing
IRB ID:	STUDY00009187
Funding:	None
Grant Title:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Interview Guide, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions);• Consent Form (revised upon request for clarification), Category: Consent Form;• Recruitment Letter for Potential Participants, Category: Recruitment Materials;• Recruitment Letter for Organizations, Category: Recruitment Materials;• Revised IRB Protocol, Category: IRB Protocol;

The IRB determined that the protocol is considered exempt pursuant to Federal Regulations 45CFR46 (2) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation on 11/13/2018.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

Sincerely,

IRB Administrator

cc: Bhoomika Bhagchandani

Bhoomika Bhagchandani

Submitted IRB Protocol

Instructions and Notes:

- Depending on the nature of what you are doing, some sections may not be applicable to your research. If so, mark as “NA”.
- When you write a protocol, keep an electronic copy. You will need a copy if it is necessary to make changes.

1 Protocol Title

Examining the Perspectives and Communicative Experiences of Individuals with Vision Disabilities in Air Travel Contexts

2 Background and Objectives

Provide the scientific or scholarly background for, rationale for, and significance of the research based on the existing literature and how will it add to existing knowledge.

- Describe the purpose of the study.
- Describe any relevant preliminary data or case studies.
- Describe any past studies that are in conjunction to this study.

The purpose of this study is to examine the air travel experiences of individuals who have vision disabilities. The aim of this research is to gain a deeper understanding of the needs and challenges of people with vision disabilities who travel independently. The study will primarily focus on the communication approaches used by both, travelers with disabilities and assistance providers, that constitute a positive air travel experience from the point of view of the travelers. This study will also explore the modes of assistance that travelers with visual disabilities prefer for air travel.

Extant literature on air travel for persons with disabilities can be classified into two main categories. Some researchers have focused their attention on specific types of disabilities and their impact on air travel (Poria, Rachel & Brandt, 2010; Saari, 2015; Daniels, Rodgers, & Wiggins, 2005). Others have investigated the environmental and physical barriers at airports and on airplanes, lending useful insights into the major issues that individuals with disabilities generally experience during their travel (Chang & Chen 2011, 2012; Darcy, 2012; Yau, McKercher, & Packer, 2003). Common issues reported by participants in these studies include inaccessibility of lavatories, inaccessibility of travel and schedule updates, improper seating on the airplane, and inadequate staff training among others. While there is substantial research that examines the air travel experience of individuals with disabilities with regard to accessibility barriers, attitudes, and disability-specific needs for air travel, gaps remain in the literature that need more attention.

Most studies on air travel and disability have predominantly focused on mobility disabilities and have examined the physical aspects of traveling with a disability. Limited attention has been given to vision disability. The inability to see the surroundings or what is happening around oneself, the lack of standard layouts at airports, too many people around, and too much noise that goes along with it can make the air travel experience particularly overwhelming as well as difficult for someone with a severe vision disability. Consequently, these individuals heavily rely on the assistance providers for receiving the visual information and getting to their desired checkpoint or terminal. The communication that happens between them and the service providers becomes critical to their successful travel as well as to their sense of independence.

The very few studies that focused on vision disability examined the overall tourist experience of vision impaired individuals including aspects such as past travel experiences, travel and booking behavior, travel benefits and positive and negative holiday experiences (Richards, Prichard, & Morgan, 2010; Small, Darcy & Packer, 2007). None of the studies that have been undertaken on vision disability so far have exclusively examined the air travel experiences of individuals with vision disabilities from a communication lens. Earlier research by Yau, McKercher and Packer (2004) included participants with vision impairment in their study of travelling with a disability but did not specifically differentiate this group from those with other impairments. The proposed study is an attempt to fill this gap in the literature.

3 Data Use

Describe how the data will be used. Examples include:

- Dissertation, Thesis, Undergraduate honors project
- Publication/journal article, conferences/presentations
- Results released to agency or organization
- Results released to participants/parents
- Results released to employer or school
- Other (describe)

The data will be used primarily to complete the dissertation. The data may also be used for presentations, conferences and publications later. Results may also be released to members of the airline industry and other organizations that are involved with designing airport special assistance policies and training modules.

<p>4 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria Describe the criteria that define who will be included or excluded in your final study sample. If you are conducting data analysis only describe what is included in the dataset you propose to use. Indicate specifically whether you will target or exclude each of the following special populations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minors (individuals who are under the age of 18) • Adults who are unable to consent • Pregnant women • Prisoners • Native Americans • Undocumented individuals
<p>To qualify for this study, individuals must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Be 18 years or older - Have a visual acuity of 20/200 (or less) in the better eye; and/or visual field of 20 degrees (or less); and/or have a vision impairment that necessitates the use of special assistance services during air travel - Travel independently (without a companion/caregiver) at least once a year availing special assistance services offered by airports or airlines. <p>Minors, adults who are unable to consent, pregnant women, prisoners, native americans, and undocumented individuals will not be recruited in this study.</p>
<p>5 Number of Participants Indicate the total number of participants to be recruited and enrolled:</p> <p>A maximum of 40 participants will be recruited in this study.</p>
<p>6 Recruitment Methods</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe who will be doing the recruitment of participants. • Describe when, where, and how potential participants will be identified and recruited. • Describe and attach materials that will be used to recruit participants (attach documents or recruitment script with the application).
<p>Recruitment will be done by the Co-PI. Participants will be recruited December 2018 through early February 2019. Participants will be recruited by the co-PI's personal network as well as reaching out to various non-profit organizations working for the empowerment of individuals with disabilities across the nation. Materials Attached with the Application</p>
<p>7 Procedures Involved Describe all research procedures being performed, who will facilitate the procedures, and when they will be performed. Describe procedures including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The duration of time participants will spend in each research activity. • The period or span of time for the collection of data, and any long term follow up. • Surveys or questionnaires that will be administered (Attach all surveys, interview questions, scripts, data collection forms, and instructions for participants to the online application). • Interventions and sessions (Attach supplemental materials to the online application). • Lab procedures and tests and related instructions to participants. • Video or audio recordings of participants. • Previously collected data sets that that will be analyzed and identify the data source (Attach data use agreement(s) to the online application).

In-depth, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions will be conducted with participants over phone, online or face-to-face (based on their preference). The interviews should last 45 to 60 minutes. The interviews will be audio-taped with the participant's permission. There will not be a long-term follow-up, however, a follow-up shortly after the interview may be conducted to clarify a point or offer more details on a comment a participant may have made in the initial interview. After all the interviews have been conducted, a preliminary analysis of interviews will be undertaken by the co-PI to identify some of the compelling issues raised by the participants. These issues will then be presented to a select few participants in a follow-up focus group to delve deeper into the topic of study. The focus-group will be conducted face-to-face or online (based on the participants' preference). The focus group will be audio-taped with participants' permission and should last between 90-120 minutes. Supporting documents for the focus group will be submitted to IRb at a later date since focus group is contingent upon the data collected in the interviews.

8 Compensation or Credit

- **Describe the amount and timing of any compensation or credit to participants.**
- **Identify the source of the funds to compensate participants**
- **Justify that the amount given to participants is reasonable.**
- **If participants are receiving course credit for participating in research, alternative assignments need to be put in place to avoid coercion.**

Participants' names will be entered in a raffle along with other participants for a chance to win a \$50 amazon gift card. The compensation will be offered by the co-PI's personal funds. The amount is reasonable given that the study does not have any funding from external sources.

9 Risk to Participants

List the reasonably foreseeable risks, discomforts, or inconveniences related to participation in the research. Consider physical, psychological, social, legal, and economic risks.

There are no social, legal and economic risks to participants.

There are two (2) minimal risks associated with participation in this project. First is a small amount of time lost (45-60 minutes) for the interview process with no direct form of compensation except for a chance to win a \$50 amazon gift card in a raffle. Second, participants may be asked to recall some air travel experiences which were stressful, uncomfortable, or otherwise unpleasant. Although the researchers do not expect any level of mental harm to occur due to the interview, if participants feel discomfort at any point to their health or mental state, they will be free to move to another question, have the answer stricken from the interview, and/or discontinue participation.

10 Potential Benefits to Participants

Realistically describe the potential benefits that individual participants may experience from taking part in the research. Indicate if there is no direct benefit. Do **not** include benefits to society or others.

There is no direct benefit to participants.

11 Privacy and Confidentiality

Describe the steps that will be taken to protect subjects' privacy interests. "Privacy interest" refers to a person's desire to place limits on with whom they interact or to whom they provide personal information. Click here for additional guidance on [ASU Data Storage Guidelines](#).

Describe the following measures to ensure the confidentiality of data:

- Who will have access to the data?
- Where and how data will be stored (e.g. ASU secure server, ASU cloud storage, filing cabinets, etc.)?
- How long the data will be stored?
- Describe the steps that will be taken to secure the data during storage, use, and transmission. (e.g., training, authorization of access, password protection, encryption, physical controls, certificates of confidentiality, and separation of identifiers and data, etc.).
- If applicable, how will audio or video recordings will be managed and secured. Add the duration of time these recordings will be kept.
- If applicable, how will the consent, assent, and/or parental permission forms be secured. These forms should separate from the rest of the study data. Add the duration of time these forms will be kept.
- If applicable, describe how data will be linked or tracked (e.g. master list, contact list, reproducible participant ID, randomized ID, etc.).

If your study has previously collected data sets, describe who will be responsible for data security and monitoring.

All interviews will be conducted in private and will remain confidential. Actual names and other identifiers (i.e., email addresses from initial contact) will not be used in the research data. For coded identifiable data, researchers will use a pseudonym to link the interview information to interpret responses. A master list will be used to ensure correct and consistent application of pseudonyms with participant names in order to link to their interview data, and to potentially get back in touch with participants for a possible follow-up focus group. The data from the interviews will not be linked on an individual level to the focus group data.

The results of this study will be used in dissertation and may also be shared in reports, presentations, or publications but participants' names will not be used. All research materials and data will be stored on the co-PI's official ASU dropbox account and will be password-protected. The data and master list will be kept for three (3) years,. Data and master list will be erased after three years (January, 2021). Only the PI and co-PI will have access to data.

12 Consent Process

Describe the process and procedures process you will use to obtain consent. Include a description of:

- Who will be responsible for consenting participants?
- Where will the consent process take place?
- How will consent be obtained?
- If participants who do not speak English will be enrolled, describe the process to ensure that the oral and/or written information provided to those participants will be in that language. Indicate the language that will be used by those obtaining consent. Translated consent forms should be submitted after the English is approved.

The co-PI will be responsible for consenting all participants.
Consent forms will be sent prior to the interviews and their consent will be audio-taped before starting the interview.

13 Training

Provide the date(s) the members of the research team have completed the CITI training for human participants. This training must be taken within the last 4 years. Additional information can be found at: [Training](#).

PI: May 25, 2016

Co-PI: September 25, 2015

Consent Form

Recruitment Letter for Potential Participants

I am a graduate student working under the direction of Professor Jeffrey Kassing in the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University. I am conducting a research study to examine the air travel experiences of individuals with vision disabilities. The study aims to gain a deeper understanding of the needs and challenges of travelers with vision disabilities in light of the special assistance policies and practices.

I am inviting your participation, which will involve responding to open-ended questions in a semi-structured, interview to discuss experiences (or policies) with air travel. Based on your preference, the interview can be conducted face-to-face, via telephone, or online. All interviews are expected to take approximately 45-60 minutes to complete. With your permission, the researchers would like to audio-record during your conversation for later transcription and detailed analysis. The interview will not be recorded without your permission. Please let me know if you do not want the interview to be recorded; you also can change your mind about audio recording after the interview starts.

After completing the interview, you will have the opportunity to ask any questions or share any concerns about the research. Any further questions can be directed to the researchers via email. After data transcription, participants may be contacted to verify the accuracy of facts during the interview. In addition, participants will be invited to join a follow-up focus group session (scheduled at a later date) to engage in further discussion along with other participants. The focus group will take approximately 90-120 minutes and will be conducted face-to-face or online (based on the participants' preferences).

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right not to answer any question, and to stop participation at any time. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. To qualify for this study, you must:

- Be 18 years or older
- Have a visual acuity of 20/200 or less in the better eye, and/or visual field of 20 degrees or less and/or
- have a form of vision impairment that necessitates the use of special assistance services during air travel
- Travel independently (without a companion/caregiver) at least once a year Use special assistance services during your air travel
-

There is no monetary benefit or other type of compensation for participating in the study with the exception that your name will be entered in a raffle among all other participants for a chance to win a \$50 amazon gift card. The winner will be randomly selected. There are no significant risks associated with this study. However, in your responses you may

recall some experiences which were stressful, uncomfortable, or otherwise unpleasant. If you feel discomfort at any point to your health or mental state you may ask to move to another question, have the answer stricken from the interview, and/or discontinue participation.

All interviews will be conducted in private. Neither personal information nor your identity will be revealed in the reporting of results. Any personal information you have provided (e.g., your name, your email address) will remain confidential. Only pseudonyms will be used in reporting findings. The results of this study will be used in a dissertation and may also be shared in reports, presentations, or publications. Coded data will also be reported in aggregate. All research materials and data will be maintained in a secure location and will be kept for three (3) years, after which time data and other related materials will be erased.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact: Jeffrey Kassing (jkassing@asu.edu) or Bhoomika Bhagchandani (bbhagcha@asu.edu). If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at (480) 965-6788.

Your verbal agreement indicates your consent to participate in the study and to be audio-recorded unless you request otherwise. Your verbal agreement will be solicited before we start the interview.

Recruitment Script for Organizations

Hi,

I am a doctoral student working under the direction of Dr. Jeffrey Kassing in the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University. I am conducting a dissertation study to examine the air travel experiences of individuals who are blind and visually impaired.

I am recruiting individuals with vision disabilities to participate in face-to-face or telephonic/online interviews which should take approximately 45-60 minutes. In order to participate, individuals must:

- Be 18 years or older
 - Have a visual acuity of 20/200 (or less) in the better eye; and/or visual field of 20 degrees(or less); and/or have a visual impairment that necessitates the need for using special assistance services during air travel
 - Travel at least once a year by air without a caregiver or companion
 - Use special assistance services during their air travel

Participation in this study is voluntary. Anything the participants share will remain confidential. When reporting results, participants will be assigned a pseudonym and all identifiable information will be removed.

Could you please circulate the attached recruitment letter with additional details about the study on your listservs and individuals who you think might be interested in participating?

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact Bhoomika Bhagchandani at 602-317-2337 (bbhagcha@asu.edu) or Dr. Jeffrey Kassing at 602-543-6631 (jkassing@asu.edu). Interested individuals can directly contact me at bbhagcha@asu.edu or 602-317-2337.

I appreciate your time and assistance with this important endeavor.

Sincerely,

Bhoomika Bhagchandani

Recruitment Script for Potential Participants

Hello,

My name is Bhoomika Bhagchandani and I am a doctoral student in the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University working under the direction of Dr. Jeffrey Kassing. I am conducting a research study to examine the air travel experiences of individuals who are blind and visually impaired.

I am looking for participants who will partake in semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews which will take approximately 45-60 minutes. All recordings will be maintained as password protected digital files that will be kept on the university server. They will be kept for three (3) years, after which time recordings will be erased.

To qualify for this study, you must:

- Be 18 years or older
- Have a visual acuity of 20/200 (or less) in the better eye; and/or visual field of 20 degrees (or less); and/or have a visual impairment that necessitates the use of special assistance services during air travel
- Travel independently at least once a year without a caregiver or companion
- Use special assistance services during air travel

You will be offered a chance to win a \$50 amazon gift card by entering your name in a raffle along with other participants. There is no other monetary benefit or other type of compensation for participating in the study. Risks associated with participation in this project are minimal. Potential benefits include voicing air travel experiences, potentially improving special assistance services, and changing policy-making procedures for services related to air travel for travelers with vision disabilities.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you would like to participate, or if you have any questions concerning the study, please contact me at bbhagcha@asu.edu or 602-317-2337.

Thank you,
Bhoomika Bhagchandani
Doctoral Candidate
Arizona State University

Interview Guide

Basic Demographic Questions

1. Age
2. Gender
3. Ethnicity
4. Education
5. Profession
6. Since when do you have your vision impairment?
7. What is the nature of your vision impairment?
8. How often do you travel by air in a year?
9. Do you usually travel alone?
10. Do you travel internationally? If so, how often?
11. Do you use any assistive aids for traveling? Can you give a few examples?

Open-ended Questions

1. What arrangements (if any) do you make before your travel date?
2. How would you describe your overall experience with air travel?
3. What is your preferred way of receiving special assistance?
4. What is the most difficult aspect of your air travel?
5. Do you think a traveler with a vision disability has the same rights and possibilities for air travel when compared to a passenger travelling without one?
6. Have you ever felt you were treated unequally because of the fact that you were a passenger with a disability during your air travel?
7. What do you think is the role of communication in such situations? What do you generally find useful in managing these situations?
8. What do you generally find useful in managing these situations?
9. Have you faced any other kind of unpleasant situations in air travel because of your disability that you would especially like to share? Discuss your initial reactions and interpretations of this incident. Describe how you managed the situation with special emphasis on your communication style and response strategies.
10. What communication practices and behaviors are particularly useful in air travel?

11. What do you think about the existing air travel policies and practices for passengers with vision disabilities?

12. Is there anything you think should be improved in air travel for passengers with vision disabilities? Please explain.

APPENDIX C
MEMBER-CHECK DOCUMENT

Below are the aggregate findings based on the analyses of data collected. Please indicate your responses to the questions included at the bottom of the document.

Results of the analyses indicate several assistance-related issues that travelers with vision impairments experience on a regular basis. These issues were categorized into five major areas including personnel training, personnel attitude toward blindness, systemic issues, policy issues and physical access issues. Each of these are discussed in the subsequent paragraphs. Participants also indicated using a variety of communication practices to manage the assistance-related issues ranging from confronting staff to educating staff, advocating for one's travel needs and avoiding communication with staff unless absolutely necessary.

Personnel Attitude toward Blindness

It was found that most participants experienced issues with how they were treated by personnel assisting them based on their blindness. The paternalistic nature of certain personnel who provided assistance was the most significant issue reported by participants. For instance, participants expressed their disapproval with personnel treating them like a child or managing their tickets/boarding pass without their permission. The overhelping nature of staff who had low expectations with the travelers' abilities to do things independently was problematic for most of the participants. Other pertinent issues included staff's reluctance to stopover at restaurants for travelers to grab something to eat and flight attendants forcing passengers to move for bulkhead seating

Staff Training Issues

Participants shared several instances where they frequently experience issues with staff that relate to their disability sensitivity and awareness training. Almost all participants expressed their dissatisfaction with how they are escorted by staff. Pushing/grabbing blind travelers is a common problem that emerged throughout most transcripts. In addition, poor English-speaking skills of escorts further lead to communication challenges for several participants trying to communicate their assistance-related needs and preferences in absence of sight. Another significant issue cited by participants was related to TSA agents' knowledge about service dogs and sensitivity to carefully handle assistive aids and devices.

Systemic Issues

A number of issues cited by participants relate to the administrative system in which assistance services are delivered to blind travelers. One of the most significant of these issues is the fact that requesting assistance in advance does not necessarily translate to immediate responses from staff at check-in and/or at a connecting airport. Almost all participants shared experiences where they were asked to wait for long periods of time to get an assistant assigned to them. All but one participant indicated their disapproval with staff offering wheelchair service by default despite specific requests not to bring a wheelchair. In addition, staff assisting multiple travelers with different or similar disabilities was an issue for several travelers

causing undue complexity in the ways in which they were being assisted. Participants also shared that there are several points during their air travel where the unavailability of assistance causes inconvenience, frustration and in some cases anxiety. Some of the areas where readily available assistance would be helpful, as indicated by several participants, include assistance at the gate, assistance going to restaurants, and assistance from the entrance of the airport to the check-in counter. The holding areas secluded from the rest of the airport was also noted as unnecessary by several participants.

Policy Issues

A number of policy-related issues as well as suggestions were made by participants. One of the most widely cited policy issues was documentation increasingly being demanded by airlines for service dogs. Participants emphatically spoke about the need for airlines to have some system in place that distinguishes between Emotional Support Animals and service dogs. Having to prove that it is a service dog and not an ESA is an additional burden that causes undue stress and anxiety for blind travelers using guide dogs. In addition, participants also pointed to the rule of prohibiting blind travelers from sitting in the exit row. Many participants expressed their frustration with staff undermining their abilities to operate an exit door independently. Another widely cited issue was the ambiguity with tipping policy for staff assisting blind travelers.

Physical Access Issues

Participants also pointed to several physical aspects of air travel that remain largely inaccessible. For instance, the inaccessibility of ticketing kiosks compels blind travelers to ask for assistance which can be easily avoided if kiosks have braille/audio feedback. A majority of participants discussed their preference and ability to travel without assistance if accessibility features were made available. Some of the suggested features include Bluetooth beacons to direct blind travelers toward their desired gates, large font signage with high contrast sign boards, standardization of airport signage and bathroom layout, accessible in-flight entertainment system, and braille/audio safety information cards in every plane.

Questions

Question1: Do any or most of these issues resonate with your air travel experiences? Please respond in 4-5 sentences.

Answer1:

Question2: Do you have any additional comments related to the findings? Please share them below.

Answer2: