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The Triple Burden: A Biopsychosocial Impact of Visual Impairment in South Africa

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Abstract:

Visual impairment has become a significant health concern, presenting challenges beyond mere sight loss. This study aimed to examine the impact of visual impairment in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa through a biopsychosocial lens, considering the interconnected biological, psychological, and social dimensions. The research question that this paper addresses is: What are the biopsychosocial impacts of visual impairment on the lives of individuals in South Africa? A qualitative research methodology using the interpretivist research paradigm was employed. A sample of people with visual impairments participated in the study and shared their lived experiences. Semi-structured, one-on-one, in-depth interviews were conducted between June and December 2020. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. The concepts of visual impairment, social support, empowerment, and their application to the biopsychosocial model were reviewed. The results were categorised into themes: biological challenges, psychology, and the social impact of visual impairment. This approach is essential to promoting independence, well-being, and full societal participation for people with visual impairment. Applying the biopsychosocial model, this paper highlights the need for comprehensive interventions beyond medical treatment, including psychological support and inclusive social policy.

Keywords:

Visual Impairment, Biopsychosocial Model, Impact, South Africa

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Introduction

Visual impairment is a global public health concern with significant implications for individuals and society (Yekta et al., 2022; Watermeyer et al., 2024). While traditionally viewed through a medical lens, this condition influences more than biological factors, affecting emotional well-being and social participation (Khorrami-Nejad et al., 2016). This paper holistically looks at the impact of visual impairment. Managing exclusion requires mental health support and economic reform, not just medical attention. Vision loss, whether congenital or acquired, alters how individuals navigate the world, interact with others, and perceive themselves (Jones et al., 2019). This paper endeavours to answer the question: What are the biopsychosocial impacts of visual impairment on the lives of individuals in South Africa? The paper examines the impact of visual impairment through a biopsychosocial model as a framework, which emphasises the interaction between biological, psychological, and social dimensions of disability (Akuffo et al., 2024). The model emphasises the need for integrated care, inclusive environments, and supportive policies. The paper begins by examining visual impairment, social support, and empowerment as they relate to the biopsychosocial model of disability. The results follow the qualitative research methodology as they align with the framework. Addressing the complex consequences of visual impairment is therefore critical for advancing disability inclusion and social justice in South Africa. The paper begins by conceptualising the concepts of visual impairment, social support, and empowerment. Coping with visual impairment, the biopsychosocial model, methodology, and results are outlined in biological, psychological, and social dimensions.

Literature Review

Understanding Visual Impairment

Understanding the impact of visual impairment requires a multidimensional perspective that recognises the interaction between medical conditions, psychological experiences, and social environments. Visual impairment is an umbrella term referring to persons with decreased visual acuity; it includes low vision and total blindness (Maake & Oduntan, 2015; Naipal & Rampersad, 2018). Globally, it is estimated that 2.2 billion people live with visual impairment, with 90 per cent residing in developing countries (WHO, 2019). Rural communities and economically disadvantaged populations often experience the greatest barriers to diagnosis and treatment. The leading cause of visual impairment is uncorrected refractive errors (Watermeyer et al., 2024). Visual impairment results in functional restrictions characterised by permanent vision loss, limited visual field, and diminished contrast sensitivity. Its consequences extend far beyond the physical limitations of sight loss (Akuffo et al., 2024). Jones, Bartlett, and Cooke (2019) conducted a study in the United Kingdom on the impact of visual impairment on daily living and quality of life. The participants reported having challenges with shopping, cooking, and doing chores, depending

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on their visual acuity. As it influences multiple aspects of daily life, including mobility, communication, education, and employment, traditional medical models tend to focus primarily on the biological dimension, but such approaches often fail to capture the full complexity of visual impairment. The biopsychosocial model offers a more holistic framework by integrating biological, psychological, and social dimensions. Applying this model to visual impairment allows a deeper understanding of how it affects individuals physically, mentally, and socially.

The Biopsychosocial Model of Disability

The models of disability provide a conceptual outline within which disability can be understood, measured, qualified, planned for, and defended. A model is a mindset or worldview with associated philosophical assumptions (Retief & Letšosa, 2018). The most appropriate model of disability is the one that describes precisely what it means to live with a disability (Bolton & Gillett, 2019; Riddle, 2020). The biopsychosocial model was employed for this study. Developed by George Engel in 1977, the biopsychosocial model challenges the traditional biomedical model by emphasising the interplay among individual experiences, psychological processes, and the social environment (Frankel et al., 2003; Bolton & Gillett, 2019; Miles, 2020). Disability is therefore understood not only as a medical condition but also as a product of interactions between individuals and their environments. In visual impairment, biological factors include eye disease or trauma, vision loss, and associated health conditions. Psychological factors refer to emotional responses such as grief, anxiety, depression, or changes in identity and self-worth. Social factors encompass societal attitudes, accessibility of environments, the availability of support systems, and inclusion in education and the workforce (Lehman et al., 2017; Miles, 2020). This model provides a more holistic understanding of disability by recognising that well-being depends on more than physical health alone. In cases of visual impairment, it highlights the importance of treating the whole person rather than focusing solely on the eyes.

Biological Impact

Visual impairment causes significant functional limitations, particularly in mobility, spatial awareness, and self-care. These limitations increase the risk of injury and reduce physical independence (Köberlein et al., 2013). Other chronic conditions often accompany a common cause. Reduced mobility may lead to sedentary behaviour, which can contribute to secondary health problems. While medical treatments and assistive devices can improve function, they do not fully restore independence or eliminate health risks. From a biological standpoint, visual impairment affects the body in several ways. Individuals with vision loss often experience functional limitations, such as difficulty with mobility, spatial orientation, and performing activities of daily living (Leissner et al., 2014; Lehman et al., 2017). These challenges can increase the risk of accidents and injuries, particularly among older adults with reduced balance or slower reflexes. Furthermore, visual impairment is frequently associated with comorbid conditions such

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as diabetes, glaucoma, cataracts, and age-related macular degeneration, which can compound overall health challenges. In addition to these direct impacts, physical inactivity due to mobility limitations may contribute to secondary health issues, such as obesity and cardiovascular disease. Medical interventions such as surgeries, medication, or assistive devices like white canes or guide dogs can help mitigate some effects, still, they do not fully address the broader implications of living with vision loss. Thus, while biological management is essential, it is only one piece of a much larger puzzle (Adler, 2009). Vision loss involves physiological changes that influence daily functioning, but its broader impact is mediated by psychological adaptation and the accessibility of social environments.

Psychological Impact

The psychological effects of vision loss include anxiety, depression, and lowered self-esteem. Many individuals experience emotional distress, especially if vision loss occurs later in life or progresses rapidly. Adapting to new ways of functioning often causes stress and mental fatigue. Bakker et al. (2019) conducted a study on the fatigue experienced by people with visual impairment when they need to perform their daily activities. Fatigue even has the potential to make the person give up on performing tasks, resulting in even more frustration. Without appropriate support, individuals may become socially withdrawn. Access to counselling and peer support is crucial for emotional adjustment and mental health. The psychological effects of visual impairment can be profound and long-lasting. Vision plays a central role in how individuals interact with and interpret the world, and losing this sense often leads to significant emotional and cognitive challenges (Lehman et al., 2017). Individuals may experience a range of emotional reactions, including grief, frustration, anxiety, and depression, especially if the vision loss is sudden or occurs later in life. Over time, many may struggle with reduced self-esteem, feelings of dependence, or fear of social judgment. Furthermore, adapting to vision loss requires considerable mental effort, which can lead to cognitive overload and stress, especially when navigating unfamiliar environments or using assistive technologies (Binder et al., 2021). These challenges may lead to social withdrawal or reduced quality of life without adequate psychological support. Counselling, peer support groups, and mental health services are vital for helping individuals build coping strategies and psychological resilience, enabling them to adapt and maintain emotional well-being.

Social Impact

Socially, visual impairment creates barriers in education, employment, and community life. Physical environments and digital platforms are often inaccessible, and social stigma can lead to exclusion or discrimination (Jones et al., 2019). These factors contribute to isolation and reduced life opportunities. Dependence on caregivers may affect autonomy and relationships. Inclusive policies, accessible design, and assistive technologies are essential to minimise these barriers. Beyond the individual, visual impairment has far-reaching implications for a person's social life and participation in society. People

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with vision loss often face barriers to education, employment, and public services, mainly due to inaccessible environments and the limited availability of adaptive resources (Dev et al., 2014). A study conducted by Jaganjac et al. (2020) examined the daily activities of employed women. Employment is regarded as the best safeguard against social exclusion and one of the main ways to inclusion in society. In many settings, they are subject to social stigma, stereotypes, and discrimination, which can result in social exclusion and a lack of opportunities. For example, employers may underestimate their abilities, or educational institutions may lack the accommodations for effective learning (Bolton & Gillett, 2019). These challenges can lead to social isolation and limit community engagement, which are linked to poorer health outcomes. Additionally, dependence on family members or caregivers for daily activities can strain relationships and reduce the individual's sense of autonomy. However, inclusive policies, assistive technology, and public awareness campaigns can reduce these social barriers and promote greater equality and participation. Creating accessible spaces and fostering inclusive attitudes are essential to empowering people with visual impairments to lead fulfilling, independent lives.

Rehabilitation and Coping with Visual Impairment

Visual impairment, like any traumatic event, can be overwhelming, shattering the self and separating the individual from what they were, often displacing them from their previous roles in the family and community (Watermeyer & Botha, 2025). Many individuals initially experience emotional reactions such as shock, denial, fear, or grief when they receive a diagnosis of visual impairment. Rehabilitation aims to optimise the use of residual vision after severe vision loss (van Nispen et al., 2020). It involves exposure to assistive devices and practical techniques that may assist an individual to navigate various aspects of life, including learning, work, and social interaction with visual impairment (Vervloed et al., 2006; Silva et al., 2014). The focus is on community integration, skills acquisition and independence, with little attention to emotional wellbeing and mental health care (Forbes & Laurens, 2026). This is due to physical barriers such as a lack of accessible transport, or financial barriers associated with transportation and treatment (Botha, 2021). Through the journey of visual rehabilitation, a person is expected to cope, to manage life and continue despite loss of sight (Botha & Watermeyer, 2025). Coping refers to how people deal with a particular limitation (Rai et al., 2019). Coping involves intrapersonal skills, and environmental resources are utilised to manage a condition perceived as demanding (Demmin & Silversterin, 2020). It is a healthy coping technique in which the person prepares for potential stressors arising from impairment (Negash & Yaw, 2020). The coping that would assist in this ranges from preventive, proactive, and reactive to reflective and awareness, as well as seeking emotional support (Stevelink et al., 2015; Botha & Watermeyer, 2025).

Coping with vision loss means a person can improve their quality of life and live as independently as possible each day. Coping with visual impairment is a complex and dynamic process that involves psychological adjustment, social adaptation, and the acquisition of practical skills that enable individuals

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to maintain independence and wellbeing (Silva et al., 2014). Some psychological coping strategies that enhance well-being and relaxation include sports, reading, sleep, prayer, and listening to music. Thus, more systematic relaxation methods are needed when the stress levels are too high (Sabel et al., 2018). The more systematic methods can include meditation and encompass practices such as mindfulness, mantra, and yoga. The music therapy strategy has been utilised throughout the ages to improve well-being, reduce pain and grief. For instance, classical music increases heart rate variability, whereas rock music decreases it.

Social Support

Social support is essential for enhancing the well-being and social inclusion of people with visual impairment. Social support refers to assistance within an interpersonal relationship, involving the exchange of resources between those involved (Taylor, 2011; Chu & Chan, 2022). It is the assistance that an individual receives, or expects to receive, from those interacting with them. Furthermore, Silver suggests that it is the process of encouraging interaction and participation between people with different socially relevant attributes (Pinquart & Pfeiffer, 2013). Social support encompasses emotional, informational, and practical assistance provided by family members, peers, communities, and formal support systems (Gottlieb & Bergen, 2010; Manitsa, & Doikou, 2022). Emotional support helps individuals cope with the psychological impact of vision loss, while informational support guides rehabilitation services, assistive technologies, and available resources (Papadopoulos et al., 2015). Practical support, such as assistance with mobility and daily activities, further promotes independence and participation in society. Collectively, strong social support networks contribute to an improved quality of life and greater social participation for people with visual impairment (Chu & Chan, 2022). In their study on loneliness and social support, Chu and Chan (2022) found that participants with visual impairment who were unemployed and lacked income stability experienced greater loneliness and stress, and had less social support.

Without social support, a person with visual impairment may experience strain and frustration. Social support is beneficial for people with visual impairments, and includes information sharing, problem-solving, collaboration, and emotional care. It encourages psychological well-being, self-esteem and self-control, and acts as a buffer against the effects of trauma (Cimarolli & Boerner, 2005). Social support is an essential concept for this study, as it can reduce the negative impact of visual impairment (Gottlieb & Bergen, 2010), and increase interaction and participation in community development activities.

Empowerment

The Global South first used the term 'empowerment' in the context of women's rights, rejecting the top-down development approach (Calvès, 2009; Febriana, 2011). It refers to transferring power to marginalised groups in society to ensure equal participation. Empowering people with visual impairment

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involves providing them with the tools, education, and opportunities to live independently and participate fully in society (Chaudhuri, 2016). Empowerment also means advocating for their rights and creating environments free from discrimination, enabling people with visual impairments to make decisions, assert their rights, and contribute meaningfully to their communities. A study conducted by Sri Takshara and Bhuvaneswari (2025) focused on the empowerment of people with visual impairment. Education, as a transformative tool, technology as an enabler to independence, and social connection with family and friends were the three elements of the empowerment of people with visual impairment.

From a biopsychosocial perspective, the empowerment of people with visual impairment is understood as a multidimensional process shaped by the interaction of biological, psychological, and social factors (McDowell, 2021; Sri Takshara & Bhuvaneswari, 2025). Biologically, empowerment involves access to vision rehabilitation, assistive technologies, and orientation and mobility training that enhance functional independence (Sri Takshara & Bhuvaneswari, 2025). Psychologically, it entails strengthening self-efficacy, resilience, and positive identity formation, enabling individuals to cope with the challenges associated with visual impairment (McDowell, 2021). Socially, empowerment requires the removal of structural barriers, including stigma, inaccessible environments, and exclusion from education and employment. These interconnected dimensions highlight that empowerment extends beyond individual adaptation to include supportive social systems and rights-based frameworks, which promote the full participation and inclusion of persons with visual impairment in society (Thakkar & Anaikkutti, 2024).

Methodology

The research methodology for this study was grounded in a descriptive and interpretive qualitative design (Bhattacharyya, 2006). The descriptive approach was employed to outline and document the key characteristics and lived experiences associated with visual impairment. This approach enabled the study to capture the everyday experiences, challenges, and social conditions that shape the lives of people with visual impairment. At the same time, the interpretive approach sought to understand how individuals make sense of their experiences within their broader social, cultural, and institutional contexts. Through this perspective, the study moved beyond mere description to explore the meanings participants attach to social exclusion and how these meanings influence their participation in society.

The primary aim of the study was to explore and analyse the impact of social exclusion on people living with visual impairment in the Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan Municipality in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. In particular, the study sought to understand how structural barriers, societal attitudes, and institutional arrangements contribute to the marginalisation of individuals with visual impairment. Ethical clearance to conduct the study was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal Human and Social Sciences Ethics Committee, ensuring that the research adhered to established ethical principles such as informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the protection of participants from harm.

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The study was guided by the central research question: What is the impact of visual impairment in the Eastern Cape, South Africa? This question was intended to uncover the multidimensional effects of visual impairment, particularly in relation to social exclusion and participation in key spheres of life.

A purposive and convenience sampling strategy was used to recruit participants who had direct experience of living with visual impairment. Purposive sampling enabled the researcher to intentionally select individuals who could provide rich and relevant insights into the phenomenon under investigation, while convenience sampling facilitated access to participants who were readily available and willing to participate. This study draws on five participants from a larger research project, selected for their relevance to the research focus. Consistent with qualitative inquiry, depth of insight was prioritised over statistical generalisation. This was part of the wider study that explored the exclusion of the visually impaired in community development practices. Below is the table of participants.

Participant ID	Age	Gender	Type of VI	Education Level	Employment Status	Location (Eastern Cape)
P1	28	Female	Partially sighted	Diploma	Employed	Uitenhage
P2	35	Male	Blind	Secondary	Unemployed	Uitenhage
P3	42	Female	Partially sighted	Secondary	Self-employed	Gqeberha
P4	31	Male	Blind	Secondary	Unemployed	Uitenhage
P5	50	Female	Partially sighted	Primary	Self-Employed	Gqeberha

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants
(N = 5)

The demographic profile of the participants offers a grounded insight into the lived realities of people with visual impairment within the study context. The group includes both men and women between the ages of 28 and 50, reflecting a range of adult life experiences and responsibilities. This diversity allows for a richer understanding of how visual impairment is navigated across different stages of adulthood. A notable pattern emerging from the data is the absence of university-level qualifications among all participants. Most have attained secondary education, with only one participant holding a diploma. This suggests that access to higher education remains limited for people with visual impairment due to ongoing structural barriers, such as inadequate inclusive education implementation, limited access to assistive technologies, and insufficient academic support. These constraints highlight how educational exclusion continues to shape life opportunities.

Employment outcomes among participants further reflect these challenges. While a few individuals are employed or self-employed, the majority are unemployed, pointing to restricted access to sustainable

livelihood opportunities. This may be attributed not only to educational inequalities but also to broader systemic issues, including workplace discrimination, lack of reasonable accommodation, and insufficient inclusion within the labour market. All participants are based in Uitenhage and Gqeberha, situating their experiences within a shared socio-economic and geographic context. This suggests that their challenges are not merely individual but are shaped by broader structural conditions, including limited access to inclusive services and opportunities within these communities. Overall, the demographic profile illustrates the interconnected nature of disability, education, and employment, underscoring the persistent structural barriers that continue to marginalise visually impaired individuals. These findings point to the urgent need for more inclusive and responsive policies that address these inequalities holistically.

Data were collected through one-on-one in-depth interviews, which provided participants with an opportunity to share their lived experiences, perceptions and challenges in a detailed and reflective manner. This method allowed the researcher to probe participants' narratives and gain a deeper understanding of the social realities shaping their lives. The interviews also created a space for participants to articulate how social exclusion manifests in their daily interactions, opportunities, and access to resources. The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis, a qualitative analytical method that involves identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns or themes within the data. Through a systematic process of coding, categorisation, and interpretation, recurring patterns in participants' narratives were identified and organised into meaningful themes.

The analysis revealed several key themes reflecting the multidimensional impact of social exclusion on individuals with visual impairment. The themes that emerged from the analysis included the biological, psychological, and social impact of exclusion. The psychosocial dimension highlighted experiences of stigma, isolation, reduced self-esteem, and emotional distress resulting from societal attitudes towards disability. The educational impact reflected barriers to inclusive learning environments, limited access to assistive technologies, and inadequate institutional support. The economic impact was evident in restricted employment opportunities, workplace discrimination, and persistent poverty among individuals with visual impairment. Lastly, the political impact revealed limited participation in decision-making processes and insufficient representation of people with visual impairment in policy and governance structures.

Results

The impact of visual impairment was categorised into biological, psychological, and social effects.

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Biological Dimension

Visual impairment affects a person's daily activities. One participant mentioned challenges with “Small font” and “travel alone outside the house”. Sometimes “loss of direction” (1). Another participant said, “I need assistance even with house chores, as my eyesight is poor” (2). While the other said, “inability to obtain a drivers licence” (3). Another noted, “Crossing the road, reading signs or identifying people” (4). While another mentioned. “Assistive devices or support from others” (5).

Psychological Dimension

The participants reported that visual impairment had a psychological impact on their lives. They felt excluded and discriminated against. Such feelings led to anxiety, depression and hopelessness, as one participant mentioned, "depression" (1). Non-participation led to social isolation and feelings of neglect, as another participant said, "Nobody cares" and "Isolation." (2). For people with visual impairments, isolation meant that they were not integrated with the rest of the community members. They only interacted with other people when there were visitors at the centre. They longed for social support and integration into a larger community. Anyone who directly or indirectly interacts with people with visual impairments can use the support system. This can include family, friends, a partner, neighbours, and other visually impaired people, as one participant mentioned, "Talking to and sharing information" (3). Another participant mentioned, "Meeting and sharing experiences" (4). Visual impairment can cause significant frustration for those who live with it. A person can easily be anxious or even depressed. This is why a visually impaired person must receive relevant social support.

The COVID-2019 pandemic increased the isolation of people with visual impairment, especially with social distancing and quarantine measures in place. To contain its spread, the country went into lockdown. People were quarantined for ten days or more to prevent the spread of infection. This social isolation caused chronic loneliness for some and increased domestic violence for others. One participant mentioned, "Staying alone" (5). Prolonged social isolation has detrimental effects on the physical and mental well-being of persons with visual impairment.

Social Dimension

The social participation of people with visual impairment can be understood through three key domains: education, employment, and social life. The educational impact refers to the limited and equitable access to education and skills experienced by visually impaired people. For example, one participant mentioned "treatment by society" and "accessibility" (1).Another noted that "special schools [are] not offering mathematics and physical science" (2). Further participants cited "changing of career choice" (3), "employment" (4), and support.

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Discussion

This study explored the biopsychosocial impact of visual impairment, examining how biological, psychological, and social factors interact to shape the lived experiences of individuals with visual impairment (Bolton & Gillett, 2019; Sri Takshara & Bhuvaneswari, 2025). The findings highlight that visual impairment extends beyond a medical condition to affect multiple dimensions of life simultaneously (Gillett, 2019; Miles, 2020). In accordance with the biopsychosocial model proposed by George Engel, the findings indicate that disability should be conceptualised within an integrated framework that acknowledges the intricate interplay between health conditions, personal experiences, and wider social influences.

Participants discussed the impact of visual impairment on their lives. The biological dimension of visual impairment includes trauma, vision loss, genetic conditions, and complications from premature birth (Bolton & Gillett, 2019). Eye diseases such as glaucoma, cataracts, and macular degeneration, also play a role (Steinman & Vasunilashorn, 2011). In some cases, brain or optic nerve damage can affect vision even when the eyes are structurally normal. Identifying these causes supports accurate diagnosis and treatment. The physical effects of visual impairment vary depending on severity and cause. People with visual impairment experience challenges with their daily living that affect their quality of life. This includes mobility, reading, personal care, and orientation (Gillett, 2019; Miles, 2020). These difficulties often require medical interventions, such as surgery, and adaptive technologies, such as screen readers. Participants described the functional limitations associated with vision loss, including difficulties with mobility, reading, and performing daily tasks independently. According to Watermeyer & Botha (2025), these limitations often require social support, assistive technologies, and rehabilitation services.

Psychological Factors

Psychologically, the study revealed that individuals with visual impairment often experience emotional and cognitive adjustments after their diagnosis or onset of the condition. Participants reported feelings of frustration, anxiety, and reduced self-esteem, particularly during the early stages of adjusting to vision loss. The emotional burden of vision loss is substantial. Individuals may experience grief, frustration, or loss of identity, especially if the impairment is acquired. Common mental health issues include anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal (Binder et al., 2021). Vision loss may reduce a person's sense of autonomy and control, leading to feelings of helplessness. Without adequate support, these psychological responses can intensify and interfere with rehabilitation. However, research shows that psychological resilience, family support, and mental health services can significantly improve coping outcomes. Psychological factors refer to the interaction of environmental circumstances with the functioning of the individual's mind (Lehman et al., 2017). Participants reported that they felt fatigued and lonely and sharing with others and getting support improved their mood and enabled them to

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perform better. Research has shown that the psychological implications of visual impairment include anxiety, loneliness and depression (Ishtiaq et al., 2016). Visual impairment affects a person's mental, social, and physical well-being (Demmin & Silverstein, 2020). Depression is seen in 85% (eighty-five per cent) of visually impaired people in their lifetime (Osaba et al., 20119). It causes sadness, memory fatigue, and an inability to relate to others.

Social Factors

The social dimension has emerged as one of the most significant factors shaping the lived experiences of people with visual impairment. Participants highlighted experiences of social exclusion, stigma, and structural barriers within education, employment, and community participation. The literature has shown that a person with a disability is less likely to obtain formal education and more likely to be uneducated and unemployed (McKenzie & Hanass-Hancock, 2017). Educators, administrators, and educational supervisors still do not understand visual impairment. Children with visual impairment experience challenges even when accessing specific school subjects (Tambala-Kaliati et al., 2017). Therefore, educators and other staff members must be trained to empower learners with visual impairment. Various subjects must be made available to widen career paths for visually impaired learners. Socially, visual impairment often leads to reduced participation, social exclusion, and discrimination. Physical environments are frequently inaccessible or inadequately adapted. Misconceptions about blindness or low vision contribute to stigma and marginalisation (Thakkar & Anaikutti, 2024). Employment opportunities for individuals with visual impairment remain limited, despite evidence that many can perform various roles with the right accommodations. Supportive networks, inclusive education policies, and accessible design are critical in enabling full societal participation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that visual impairment is a complex phenomenon shaped by the interaction of physiological, psychological, and social factors. Drawing on the biopsychosocial model of disability, the findings from the Eastern Cape Province reveal that individuals with visual impairments experience significant challenges, such as frustration, anxiety, hopelessness, depression, and feelings of neglect. These challenges are further compounded by structural barriers, particularly in education, where participants reported limited access, slow academic progression, and exclusion from key subjects such as mathematics. Consequently, these limitations restrict the acquisition of critical skills and reduce access to employment opportunities, highlighting the multifaceted impact of visual impairment on wellbeing and social participation.

From a theoretical perspective, the study strengthens the application of the biopsychosocial model by illustrating how visual impairment is experienced through the dynamic interaction of biological conditions, psychological responses, and social environments. It reinforces the need to move beyond

purely medical or deficit-based understandings of disability towards a more holistic framework. Furthermore, the findings highlight the importance of concepts such as social support and empowerment, demonstrating how they can be applied within a biopsychosocial perspective to better understand lived experiences and the interconnectedness of impairment, context, and agency.

In terms of practical implications, the findings underscore the need for comprehensive and coordinated interventions in South Africa that address the multiple dimensions of visual impairment. This includes strengthening healthcare services, expanding psychosocial support, and ensuring inclusive education through improved access to learning resources and participation in critical subjects. Additionally, policies and infrastructure must prioritise accessibility to enhance mobility and social inclusion, while public awareness initiatives and rights-based approaches are essential to uphold the dignity of individuals with visual impairments. Ultimately, integrated strategies that align medical, educational, and social responses are necessary to improve wellbeing and enable meaningful social participation.

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