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A bottom-up definition of Self-Sufficiency: Voices from low-income jobseekers

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Abstract
Self-sufficiency (SS) is the epitome of America's 'reluctant' welfare state. It is generally accepted in social welfare policy circles as a concept related to independence and financial stability. Nevertheless, SS is not a term agreed upon in practice by policymakers, researchers, or service providers and is frequently used without a clear common definition. In this sense, the purpose of this study is to explore the extent to which the top-down definition of 'economic' SS as the social policy goal is consistent with how the clients of job training programs perceive the term. Using a grounded theory approach, a bottom-up definition of SS was derived from a focus group of low-income jobseekers. The focus group was transcribed for a content analysis from which a client-centered definition of SS was drawn. Findings suggest that SS is a process of developing psychological strength properties and a goal-oriented progression toward realistic financial outcomes. Implications for evidence-based community interventions for client empowerment and workforce development are suggested.

Key words
Self-sufficiency, focus groups, grounded theory, workforce development, poverty, empowerment, hope

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INTRODUCTION

Despite the mounting evidence resulting from more than a decade of research suggesting that welfare-to-work transition could bring severe challenges to welfare leavers (Danziger et al., 2000; Ellwood, 1986; Henly, 2000), self-sufficiency (SS) has been accepted as an economic and financial concept (i.e., finding a job and leaving welfare) that one ought to attain. However, SS is not a term agreed upon by policymakers, researchers, or practitioners and is commonly used without being defined (Hawkins, 2005; Perry-Burney and Jennings, 2003; Sandfort and Hill, 1996). This term has even gained legitimacy as a major policy goal in the public domain despite lack of agreement on what the term means (Hawkins, 2005).

Federal policymakers give no explicit definition of the term except to say that it is obtained through work, that it includes freedom from dependence on government support, and that it strengthens families (Gowdy and Pearlmutter, 1994). One policy example is the Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Act of 1996 [PRWORA; U.S. Public Law 104-193], which was based on the premise that poverty is caused by the poor's withdrawal from the labor market due to work-limiting cultural and psychological barriers (Mead, 1992). This logic is imbedded in a view of welfare dependency as rooted in psychological barriers which prevent people from entering and advancing in the labor market. Adopting Mead's recommendation to end welfare dependency by way of work, welfare reform assumed that the psychologically debilitating welfare dependency will be overcome by labor force participation.

While the political discourse considered psychological dimensions as key to affecting dependency, the policy definition of SS in this legislative context continued to be limited to employment outcomes – i.e., leaving welfare and securing any available jobs – and with no mention of rising above the poverty threshold as one of the main goals of the legislation

(Cancian, 2001; Hong, 2004; Tickamyer et al., 2000). The assertion has been that once inserted in the labor market, former welfare clients would automatically be freed from the psychologically damaging welfare dependency and therefore become self-sufficient. However, with the understanding that hopelessness mediates the relationship between material deprivation and psychological distress both for welfare recipients and low-wage non-recipients (Patterson & Friel, 2001), encouraging work alone may be too simplistic a prescription for dealing with the complex nature of poverty (Pearce, 2007).

As the implementation of welfare reform has been underway, efforts to quantify SS for improved economic well-being outcome started to grow at the local level with the passage of Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA; U.S. Public Law 105-220). This legislation established the current version of the federal job training and employment programs with the primary main goal of increased employment, retention, independence, and earnings (DiNitto, 2005: 371). WIA leaves the definition of SS to the discretion of the State or Local Workforce Investment Boards (WIB). Based on WIA's use of the term, SS is a threshold below which one does not meet basic family needs and would therefore become eligible for WIA programs.

One example of a WIB discretion is the City of Los Angeles adopting whichever is greater between the local Living Wage Standard (adjusted annually) and household income above 200% poverty level as the definition of SS (City of Los Angeles, n.d.). For other states, SS has been used synonymously with economic independence (Caputo, 1997) – a family's ability to pay 100 percent of their necessary bills without assistance from government or other people. Similarly, the National Affordable Housing Act of 1990, which authorized the Family SS program, defined economic SS as it relates to housing – achieving economic independence from all housing assistance (Bratt and Keyes, 1997: 12-3).

The SS definitions proscribed by both policies are 'absence of public welfare dependency' under PRWORA and 'having enough money to meet basic needs' under WIA. These top-down policy definitions of SS have been conceived as 'desirable' outcomes that uphold and maintain the American ideological values of liberty, self-reliance, and individuality (Daugherty and Barber, 2001; Tickamyer et al., 2000; Sandlin, 2004; Shain, 1994). By primarily focusing on employment outcomes, these narrow definitions fall short of addressing the comprehensive nature of personal and systemic barriers to obtaining the goal of SS. In other words, the top-down promotion of SS as defined by policy goals marginalize the poor by privileging labor market success outcomes (Sandlin, 2004) rather than the personal process of developing psychological strength on the path to becoming empowered workers (Gowdy and Pearlmutter, 1993; 1994).

In response to the widening gap between the living reality of program participants and the application of top-down SS in promoting labor market success outcomes for programs and policies, the inadequacy of a singular focus on the latter has been echoed by a small group of scholars (Bratt and Keyes, 1997, 1998; Daugherty and Barber, 2001; Gowdy and Pearlmutter, 1993; 1994; Hawkins, 2005). Although with some variations, these authors agree that SS is more multifaceted than simply finding employment or having sufficient income. For instance, Hawkins (2005) reconceptualizes SS as Personal and Family Sustainability (PFS) – "maximizing full human potential to establish long-term economic, physical, psychological, and social well-being for individuals and their families" (86).

Among these studies, however, only one (Gowdy and Pearlmutter, 1994) asked the low-income clients about their definitions of SS. In this study SS as defined by clients was a "personal process" of acquiring (1) money and resource, (2) psychological power, and (3) skill

(Gowdy and Pearlmutter, 1994). In the same vein, the present study attempts to add to the knowledge of the client-centered definitions of SS by replicating Gowdy & Pearlmutter's (1994) study 10 years later in a contemporary policy context. It seeks to explore the extent to which other definitions can complement a narrowly focused one that views SS only as a form of financial achievement.

Suggested by Daugherty and Barber (2001), a bottom-up approach was used to capture the meaning of SS from the voices of those who are directly affected by and live within the contemporary welfare policy reality. They argue that a bottom-up inquiry is needed to shift "the frame of reference from the dominant political-economic discourse … to the differential effects that the economy has on the various segments of society" (663). This approach is embodied in what they term the ecology of work perspective, by which one can understand SS as "the lived experience of workers as they seek a meaningful existence in the connection of their work and family lives" (663). Underscoring the discrepancy between the top-down policy goals and the bottom-up perceptions of the outcomes (Tickamyer et al., 2000), this study can widen the policy discourse to include empowerment-based workforce development practice and evaluation.

METHODS

Research Site

As part of the St. Louis Regional Jobs Initiative of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Metropolitan Education and Training (MET) Center offers a comprehensive set of job training, placement and advancement services to low-skilled workers to help people work their way out of poverty and to strengthen their families and neighborhoods. The MET Center is a unique partnership of public, private and community-based organizations, which includes the City of St.

Louis, the St. Louis County and Better Family Life, that combines the local workforce development initiatives. It is charged with the responsibility to evaluate their effectiveness and suggest a more realistic definition of SS that is to provide low-income and low-skilled jobseekers in the St. Louis region with sustainable employment opportunities. With the goals of to exploring a consumer-based definition of SS and to *test the links between top-down and bottom-up approaches to SS*, the MET Center agreed to participate in this study. This research project materialized as a university-community collaborative partnership among the faculty and student of Saint Louis University and a MET Center staff.

Focus Group and Sample

Linhorst (2002: 209) defines the focus group as a qualitative research method in which a moderator uses "the group process to stimulate discussion and obtain information on the beliefs, attitudes, or motivations of participants on a specific topic". Use of the focus group for this investigation was a natural fit, considering that the goal of this research to assess the bottom-up community views of SS. This format has "wonderful potential for efficiently gathering a large amount of data" by way of removing power differentials between the interviewer and the interviewee(s) (Ruckdeschel and Shaw, 2002: 240).

Furthermore, by giving voice to and empowering vulnerable populations, focus groups can advance the agenda of social justice (Madriz, 2000). The focus group format empowers clients by providing them the sense that they are meaningfully contributing to service improvement (Linhorst, 2006). Social change at large could start from being informed locally of what best serves the needs of socially excluded individuals. Some recent studies have taken this bottom-up approach to highlight the voices of women who were transitioning from welfare to

work (Brandwein and Filiano, 2000; Cooney, 2006; Pearlmutter and Bartle, 2000; Tickamyer et al., 2000).

The general recommendation is to conduct between one and six focus groups to increase the reliability of the data (Sim, 1998) and stop data collection at the point of conceptual saturation. (Morgan, 1996). However, this study employed one focus group of the client population at the MET Center given their relative homogeneity (Powell and Single, 1996), and the complexity of the subject under investigation and the utility of the generated data (McLafferty, 2004). Rather than segmenting multiple groups based on various categorizations, we focused on one purposive sample that closely resembled the client population at the MET Center. The main purpose of doing this was to examine the emerging bottom-up definition of SS that could be useful for improving the performance measure at the MET Center.

The MET Center recruited and formed a focus group of adult individuals who were currently enrolled in various types of work readiness training and education programs at the center. The group can be characterized as vulnerable low-income and low-skilled jobseekers that lack education and skills, have limited human capital, have health problems, are challenged with a host of employment barriers, live in areas of concentrated poverty and joblessness, and subsequently have difficulty finding and keeping jobs in the St. Louis region. The focus group included 14 participants, all of whom were African American. There were 8 women and 6 men and their ages appeared to have a wide range between 18 (a requirement for participation) and mid-40s.

The focus group was conducted at the MET Center and was video taped with the consent of the participants. Participation was entirely voluntary and confidentiality was protected. The participants signed informed consent forms before information was gathered through an

approximately two-hour focus group conducted by the first and the second author of this paper. Exploratory in nature, this study posed a set of broad and related questions to allow a bottom-up definition to emerge (Linhorst, 2002: 210). The investigators' role was to ask probing questions to assist the discussions on SS from the participants' own experiences and viewpoints.

In order to start the discussion, a brainstorming one-page survey in an open-ended form was passed out, which the participants spent approximately 10 minutes filling out before starting the focus group. The questions included:

(1) In your own words, what does SS mean to you?

(2) What makes up SS? In other words, what are the components of SS? And how much money do you think would be required to meet these needs?

(3) Please list what factors can help you achieve SS?

In order to encourage full participation, this exercise was used to allow everyone to think about this abstract concept prior to discussing it. Participants were informed that this instrument was to be used to individually reflect on their perceptions on SS.

Data Analysis

The focus group interview was analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory is "local theory" (Elden, 1981: 261) that "follows from data rather than preceding them." It posits that multiple realities depend on local contextual factors (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 205). The grounded theory methodology generates knowledge through theoretical sensitivity, sampling, coding, memoing, and sorting (Glaser, 1992; 2001). The focus group transcripts and notes taken during the interview were analyzed using a constant comparison method (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The process of multiple iterations of comparing

incidents applicable to each category and integrating these categories allowed grounded theory generation to be refined over time.

First, various conceptualizations of SS were free-coded as they appeared in the text. Atlas-ti, a computer-based text analysis program, was used to manage the emerging codes that were later grouped under families of codes. Grouping of higher-order families of codes continued until "conceptual saturation" was reached, a point at which no new information could be revealed by the classification process. Then, axial coding was performed to connect concepts with each other (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The investigators did not anticipate one all-agreeable definition to emerge as a result of the analysis. Rather, the investigators hoped that this bottom-up process of developing a client-centered definition of SS would yield a comprehensive understanding of the term to empower these individuals.

FINDINGS

The bottom-up client definition of SS depicted an empowering path toward a realistic financial goal. SS according to the focus group participants is a process, rather than an outcome, that involves moving away from holding unrealistic financial outcome goals (box 1), taking steps to build inner strength and future outlook (box 2), and moving forward by acquiring skills and resources and toward realistic financial goals (boxes 3 and 4) [see Figure 1]. This SS pathway moves through the intersection between the trajectory of individuals' position in the labor market and acceptance of economic SS as a viable outcome.

[take in Figure 1 here]

Box 1 represents the top-down policy goal that imposes the financial outcome as a measure of SS. Many clients form unrealistic financial goals when accepting economic SS yet

remain excluded from the labor market. Often discouraged workers dismiss economic SS as a reachable goal when met with the reality of continued exclusion from the labor market.

Boxes 2 and 3 constitute the empowering psychological pathway and Boxes 3 and 4 describe the process of moving forward toward realistic financial goals. Finding inner strength and future outlook moves people on the continuum of labor market inclusion and helps them make gradual progression toward goals based on self-motivation and development of skills and resources. As short-term financial goals are reached incrementally, one accepts economic SS as a realistic and feasible goal, and subsequently moves closer to the ideal SS outcome. The cycle feeds back to box 2 when an unsuccessful outcome sends them back to a marginalized position in the labor market, from which they could bounce back by following the same path.

Having Enough Money on My Own

In response to the question 'what does SS mean to you?' a few participants voiced their strong position subscribing to the financial definition of SS. This was consistent with the top-down policy prescription that views SS as a financial outcome. Having enough money to get out of poverty reflected the urgent financial need but an unrealistic financial goal. Economic security was supported under the reason that they need to be financially rewarded in the labor market in order to satisfactorily meet their daily needs. This involves having financial stability that is absent of worrying about not being able to pay for the necessities.

> Respondent A: Everybody in this room knows what it's like to be poor but you survive through it … that is why money is so important ... right now because we are poor and we know what it's like to have a pack of ramen noodles and some Kool-Aid and that is it.

> Respondent B: Right now, financial is important because if I don't' have money to get here … (and with no money) I don't get here.

> Respondent C: … if I could take care of all of my responsibilities … everyday expenses like transportation, and I can do what I truly want to do whether it's buying a car or whatever then that is SS. It's when I am not worried about money that I am going to be short this month. [It is not having] to worry about finances or transportation and things like that and be independent … and not having to worry about turning to the streets.

Another element that represented economic SS had to do with 'making it' without any help from the government. When asked if they would assess themselves as being SS, one respondent answered:

> Respondent D: I am not SS now because I lost employment and … because I am asking the state for help … I am not just sitting at home relying on this program for the next four years. You have to get it out of your mind, I have to go back to school.

While economic security, financial stability, and independence were regarded as the most important elements of SS, it was clear that these participants were 'disconnected' workers in Box 1. They seemed to be caught between upholding unrealistic financial goals and being excluded from the labor market. SS became a more complex term to them when faced with the question of what level of financial resources and degree of independence were to be considered sufficient. SS as the financial outcome provided them the reality check and thus a negative reinforcement that what the policy world expects people to achieve is too far out and ideal to reach.

Many participants critically reacted to the notion that SS is a financial condition defined by an absolute income threshold. Having enough money could not necessarily guarantee SS because "you use the money, you lose the money, because it means you have spent it foolishly" if you lead "an extravagant lifestyle" (Respondent A). One participant shared frustration about the harsh individualistic pressure applied for the low-income population while the mainstream society enjoys the communal interdependence from friends, families, and neighbors.

> Respondent E: I look at the word … but it does go with selfishness in my eyes you have to go for yourself … everything is about self … I look at it as I don't care who you are,

> everybody needs help in some way, some form, some fashion … it is the help that gets you where you are going so you can get that money you need for yourself.

Here, the impossibility of reaching this idealistic goal for the poor was emphasized, along the lines of a general assessment that economic independence cannot be realistically achieved by any individual in our society. The financial definition appeared to be the 'right' answer in principle, but most participants found this to be far from the reality when asked if they perceived themselves to be SS. One answer was, "If you are talking financial, no, if you are talking mentally, yeah I am SS. It depends on what aspect of SS you are talking about" (Respondent F).

Psychological Empowerment Process

When asked what the components of SS were, respondents agreed that SS for discouraged workers (Box 2) has more to do with the mental state of mind which consists of finding inner strength and positive future outlook. SS has to do with the psychological empowerment process which involves moving from being discouraged workers (Box 2) to becoming motivated workers (Box 3). First, having psychological strengths is the key element of SS. This process as suggested by respondents starts with having the sense of own value and worth. Respondent E described it as having confidence that starts from inside: "I want everybody else to have that same confidence … you need to drive it in yourself … I am not speaking for nobody but for me, it's SS." MET Center's efforts to not simply provide skills training but also psychological empowerment of clients was strongly reflected in the following comment:

> Respondent H: We did have a lot of complaints in our class because the title was job training and at the beginning of the two weeks people have problems with the speakers and everything, but at the end of the two weeks everyone had a change of heart because they teach that that it starts with you.

Respondents agreed on the importance of developing the level of confidence that one can control life outcomes by conquering the obstacles at both personal and institutional levels. In this regard, SS meant for the participants that "you have in yourself faith and some power … you get that from the inside … my inner self energy helps you just keep going" (Respondent D). Based on this psychological strength quality, SS is "definitely being comfortable about being in charge … and not just think about it" (Respondent C). This psychological empowerment would allow participants to take control of the next steps of managing their lives and environment.

> Respondent I: SS to me means being able to take care of myself, being able to get out and do something powerful besides sitting at home and doing nothing … I have to be able to change and do something with my life.

> Respondent J: SS to me is being able to confidently take care of myself and the family, not just concentrating on money … it's about being educated, knowing what is around me, and knowing how I can help. It's about who you are and what you value that determines what you want.

The second element of SS is developing self-consciousness within the larger economic environment by having a positive future outlook. Believing that they could potentially be connected to a career job through the MET Center programs provided the participants with the sense of realistic future orientation. This future orientation for clients is based on the feeling that they are going somewhere that matters. Also, it has to do with knowing that one can take care of oneself and his/her family for a long period of time by imagining a place for themselves within the labor market opportunity structure.

> Respondent J: I was discouraged and I got tired of not having a job and I looked at this place a year ago because I could not afford to go to school, but then when I actually got in my head that I was going to come, it was exciting and exhilarating because now I don't have to go looking for a job, I'm getting a career.

> Respondent I: I am SS because I can do something better … and I am taking the initiative to do something.

Another participant stated that he was challenged to better himself by his close friends making "a quick turnaround" that took the initial steps and determined that "If they could do it, I could do it too" (Respondent A). In this process, some respondents seemed to have constructed "possible selves" or representation of the self in the future (Markus & Nurius, 1986) in terms of their potential economic mobility. It is, therefore, important to develop a positive future outlook by associating with a network of people.

> Respondent B: I think people who you surround yourself with are a big part because if they aren't trying to do something with themselves, they are going to hold you back. So if you want to be positive and you want to make it, you have to surround yourself with people that … have a shared meaning.

Most importantly, respondents resiliently continued their efforts in the labor market motivated by the belief that they can make a difference in their children's lives: "That is my motivation, to get up, is my daughter" (Respondent B).

> Respondent K: The first part is you have to have a positive attitude, keep going and keep going, no matter what it takes and then it will pay off on your kids in the future.

> Respondent D: The other thing is that to have five people I have to take care of and when I look at them I am like you have got to make it better for those kids …

Process of Moving Toward Goals

There was consensus that the definition of SS depends on each individual's experience because the concept can mean different things based on how the 'self' perceives what is considered sufficient. Therefore, SS is a concept that is related to individual needs, and the definition of SS cannot be written in absolute terms that apply to everyone in the same way. One comment describes the comprehensiveness of what the term represents: "financial is a big part of it, it's also emotional, physical, mental, and it's like a package … to be a whole person …" (Respondent G). This same respondent followed up later by suggesting that "it's not just about

being, it's about feeling, it's not just about money, it's about taking care of myself." In this regard, getting a job and moving from the welfare rolls is no guarantee of SS.

It was noted by the participants that SS is a process of moving forward towards individual goals as depicted in Boxes 3 and 4. This could be understood as a process that begins with self-motivation, skills and resource development, and increments of achieving the goals, moving from being motivated workers (Box 3) to being empowered workers (Box 4).

When asked to define SS, participants shared that one cannot be 100% self-sufficient in a given point in time but it has to do with the process of getting to the next level which "continues until death" (Respondent D). This process of moving forward, stated one participant, "has to start with self, you have to want it" (Respondent F). The motivational aspect of SS that triggers the future progression was echoed by another respondent who commented, "To me it's about desire … this is just step one" (Respondent C). SS in this context becomes something more tenable for everyone, "I am motivating myself … it's about a progression" (Respondent K).

> Respondent F: Technically we all here are self-sufficient, physically, mentally, emotionally … financially, I know I am not … physically, I get me here everyday … I have my self-motivation to come here and complete this class … the class is going to help me reach the next step … the other part of SS that I don't have.

> Respondent L: To me SS is about self determination and self motivation because accomplishing this program and getting through it is a goal of mine ... I can't go back because I am better than what I was before I came here.

The use of skills and resourced is described as essential to nurturing the self-motivation to progress towards future goals. As people become motivated, the next step in helping the poor move forward in the labor market structure will require tangible skills to find and keep good jobs. Also, having appropriate resources – i.e., knowledge – is crucial for providing stability and sustainability as one moves forward.

> Respondent C: For me, SS means being financially secure, stable, able to go to a job … having the knowledge and skills to progress in whatever field I am working in and making outside applications to be successful.

> Respondent F: SS is about the knowledge I have gained now, I am so much more marketable for the work environment than when I graduated from high school … you need to know what you need to know to get to the next level.

> Respondent M: The world is going to change so we need to change with it.

Respondents saw that there are different levels of SS and these levels are reached as individuals move toward the goals and make future progress. In this sense, SS is "a process, it takes time; we all reach the next level … I am not here to go back" (Respondent E). This may take a long time as one stated, "They want to get there too fast instead of taking the time to advance to the level they need to be at." (Respondent B).

> Respondent L: SS to me … is more about being able to accomplish a goal you set in life and follow a profession or career … so you are able to support your family, go to college, prosper in life and not just settle in life and think I made it.

> Respondent N: SS to me means gaining employment after graduating from the MET Center and turning the employment into a career, saving money so my children can go to college and be able to retire with money saved.

> Respondent E: That is what I was saying about setting goals, you don't stop, you just don't stop.

Situating SS in their life context, participants found themselves to be on the path toward their goals. For empowered workers (Box 4), SS is a continuous feeling of forward progress with sustainability, financial stability and management.

> Respondent L: I would say I am and I ain't [self-sufficient] in the sense that I am supporting my family and I am making progress to the future, but as far as reaching my goal and finding that career and … sending my children to college, I am not there yet. I would say I am in between, I am on the right path.

> Respondent E: I think it's a process; we are all here to better ourselves. To me, that is SS. We start with that and we could continue to do something for yourself in the meantime, so I do believe I am self-sufficient just now. I am moving forward, not backward. And I set goals and keep going.

DISCUSSION

A grounded theory method was employed in anticipation that a socially just, bottom-up definition of SS would emerge for larger applications to community and policy practice. First, adherence to the current policy target on economic SS is reflected in participant responses as *having enough money on my own*. Economic SS assumes that individuals could determine their labor market outcomes given whatever the structural environment – a bootstrap approach to economic well-being. While accepting this as the desirable goal is encouraged by the current policy environment, participants found it to be unrealistic considering that it is out of reach for many of them to achieve as an immediate outcome. There was a gap between the ideal type economic SS as a financial goal and the reality of being excluded from the labor market.

Then, SS was regarded not necessarily as having to do with money but as a psychological process. Psychological SS only partially accepts economic SS as a relative term that one should ideally achieve in the future. The path involves a process of *finding inner strength and future outlook* and then *moving forward toward some financial goals*. This developmental pathway is described as building individual strength and capacity to move forward within the labor market structure. Maintaining a sustainable balance in this forward progress is important as one overcomes multiple barriers to achieve a realistic financial goal.

Consistent with Gowdy and Pearlmutter's (1994) study in which focus group participants emphasized that SS is an ongoing process, the present study captured the concept of SS more as a psychological empowerment process both at the personal and economic levels (Bratt & Keyes, 1998; Gowdy and Pearlmutter, 1993; 1994; Herr et al., 1991; Okagaki, 1989). Empowerment involves developing self-efficacy or expectations that people hold about their abilities to

accomplish certain tasks (Bandura, 1994) and consciousness raising or understanding individual experience within the larger systemic context (Evans, 1992). The SS pathway described in the present study is similar to a local empowerment-based development perspective where the human agency acquires the ability to determine the pathways for one's own well-being and gaining power to further their own cause (Singh, 2007).

Interestingly, the bottom-up definition of SS potentially embodies the concept of hope. The two key aspects of 'hope' are: (1) goal-directed determination (agency component), and (2) planning of ways to meet goals (pathways component) (Snyder et al., 1991). Hope is an important personal resource in the Lazarus model of stress and coping (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984); it empowers individuals to perceive stressful environment as less intimidating and to see themselves as more competent to overcome stressors. This study hypothesizes that hope determines economic SS outcome and therefore proposes that it be applied to areas of practice in the workforce development programs and welfare-to-work policies. Targeting hope as the empowering pathway to economic SS would require "developing relationships based on respect for clients" and evaluating individual progress on each goal (Bratt and Keyes, 1998: 807).

On the continuum of labor market inclusion in Figure 1, we speculate that as individuals progress toward goals within favorable economic reality, they will experience increased levels of hope. This may be supported by Bourdieu's (1984) explanation of the 'habitus' which explicates the process whereby aspirations are shaped by the set of opportunities available from one's position in the social/class structure of a given society. Nonetheless, the current policy environment continues to uphold SS as an individually-focused success ideology of welfare reform (Sandlin, 2004) and neglects the structural 'work opportunity' part of the welfare reform legislation (Cooney, 2006). While Mead (1986) disagrees with the importance of improving the

opportunity structure to motivate clients, labor market inclusion along with psychological strengths codetermine hope as it relates to employment.

Declining job availability in regional labor markets (Wilson, 1996) will suggest that promoting strength-based SS as a behavioral change strategy may not be enough. The full scope of client empowerment covers "a process through which clients obtain resources – personal, organizational, and community – that enables them to gain greater control over their environment and to attain their aspirations" (Hasenfeld, 1987: 478-479). Therefore, as the next step of empowerment, community and policy practice ought to address the structural nature of poverty (Hong, 2009). Poverty and working poverty are not only conditioned by individual characteristics, but are exacerbated by structural employment barriers and marginal positions in the labor market (Hong, 2004; Hong and Pandey, 2007; Hong and Wernet, 2007; Rank, 2004).

CONCLUSION

This study revealed the multidimensionality of a process-oriented SS through a bottom-up approach. Nonetheless, one would have to be careful not to commit an ecological fallacy by overgeneralizing the findings from this one site study. Based on the client-based definition of SS, future studies can bolster the rigor by examining focus groups at various stages in the MET Center programs (i.e., orientation, current, and post-graduation) and compare how pervasive and strong the themes are with respect to various elements of the hope concept. In this regard, implications for future research would be to conduct a comparative qualitative study and follow up with a quantitative study to confirm the hypotheses generated from grounded theory.

Grounded theory is important as a local theory because it can guide the bottom-up work such as this one in broadening the base of policy information. In contrast to the top-down

outcome-based definition of economic SS, the bottom-up SS is a dynamic interaction of the psychological development with the economic progress at every stage of the welfare leavers' trajectory off of welfare. It is an ongoing interplay of the labor market position and the acceptance of a top-down definition of SS, whereby one moves through the stages of psychological empowerment, motivating oneself to acquire skills, educational training, and reaching realistic financial goals.

The bottom-up approach can both enhance the quality of services for users and strengthen policy work at large. Practically speaking, empowering clients will have to involve moving them toward internal locus-of-control / external locus-of-responsibility (Sue, 1981), which is "characteristic of those who, despite a lack of opportunity, believe in their ability to shape events in their own lives if given a chance" (Evans, 1992: 142). At the programmatic level, a broad range of support (Cancian , 2001) is required, particularly continuous formal support such as holistic job training programs (Gray, 2005), in order to obtain and maintain a living-wage job. This will involve targeting psychological strength properties – i.e., self-esteem, self-efficacy, and employment hope – in various stages of these programs as participants become empowered workers.

In reality, however, there has been the lack of policy focus to encourage local services that particularly target the psychological empowerment pathway to economic success. Empirical studies examining this dynamic are sparse, but we can draw from a few that support our findings. Kunz and Kalil (1999) found that welfare use outcome is associated with low self-esteem. More recently, Sullivan (2005) suggested that Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients' emotional wellbeing (i.e., self-efficacy and self-esteem) was significantly associated with working in jobs that paid more than minimum wage. In this regard, Herr and Wagner

(2003) suggest that a renewed focus on the psychological perspective – cultivating in individuals a better sense of self-efficacy – is important for success of welfare reform programs.

While achieving psychological empowerment is important, psychological SS alone may be insufficient in practice. It is rather the beginning of the process that leads to self-motivation by way of developing inner strength and future outlook and to move forward in reaching financial goals by way of utilizing skills and resources. The argument of this paper is that these empowered workers will have upheld their end of the bargain in the labor market, at which time if one is work-ready then the matching should occur with existing opportunities. However, if jobs are not ready to employ the work-ready individuals, not achieving economic SS would then be not the problem of the individuals but one of the labor market system. Hong and Pandey (2008) support this by finding that human capital in the form of education and training operate less favorably for the poor than the non-poor.

Therefore, in order to sustain the growth of SS for individual jobseekers, this paper calls for sound community and policy interventions in the form of local labor market development to counter the way in which low-income jobseekers have to be 'dependent' on the demand side of the labor market to achieve SS (Hong, 2009). The current jobs structure alone is not enough to ensure economic mobility and therefore it is imperative to rejuvenate America's 'public will' to strengthen policy, labor market, family and educational institutions (Iversen & Armstrong, 2006). Collaborative community development that comprehensively coordinates institutional fabrics and public policy responses to promote sustainable job development at the local level would need to be combined. As Hong and Wernet (2007) would argue, it is vital to resurrect a 'common-good response' that addresses the structural employment barriers as shared responsibility in order to rebuild inclusive local labor markets from the bottom-up.

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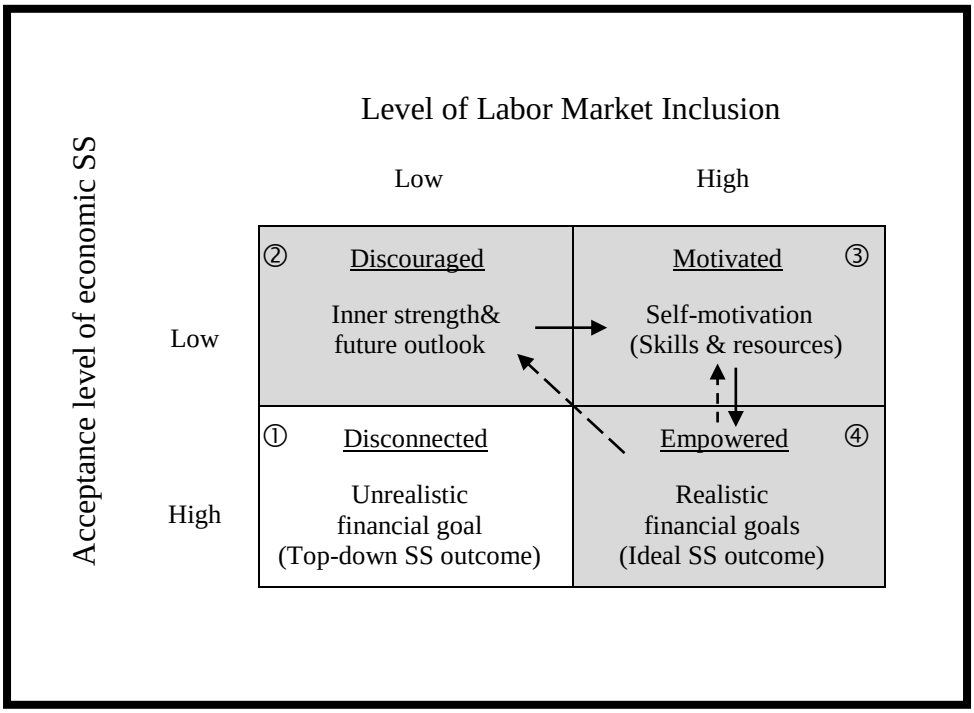
Figure 1: A bottom-up empowerment pathway to economic SS