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# Toward a client-centered benchmark for self-sufficiency: Evaluating the 'process' of becoming job ready.

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## Toward A Client-Centered Benchmark for Self-Sufficiency:

### Evaluating the ‘Process’ of Becoming Job Ready

#### **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study is to evaluate how service providers, clients, and graduates of a job training program define the term self-sufficiency (SS). This community-engaged, mixed method study qualitatively analyzes focus group data from each group and quantitatively examines survey data obtained from participants of the program. Findings reveal that psychological transformation as a ‘process’ represents the emic definition of SS—psychological SS—but each dimension of the concept is reflected in varying degrees by group. Provider and participant views are vastly different from the outcome-driven policy and funder definitions. Implications for benchmarking psychological SS as an empowerment-based ‘process’ measure of job readiness in workforce development evaluation are discussed.

**KEY WORDS:** Workforce development, psychological self-sufficiency, employment hope, employment barriers, mixed method

## INTRODUCTION

Since the inception of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA; U.S. Public Law 104-193), or more commonly referred to as welfare reform, the emphasis on self-sufficiency (SS) or ‘self-reliance’ through labor market participation has become even more pronounced (Hong, Sheriff, & Naeger, 2009). Reduction in the availability of public assistance and increased scope and intensity of work requirements for recipients have been the resulting outcomes. Generally, SS is understood both in theory and practice in terms of encouraging economic independence and financial achievement for individuals. However, Daugherty and Barber (2001) contend that this “classical liberal philosophical ideal ... inappropriately focuses on a rational and economic view of personhood” (p.662).

In this regard, the issues relevant to community practice addressed by this study are twofold. First, there is the overemphasis of the economic dimension of SS in policy and program goals (Hawkins, 2005; Hong, Sheriff, & Naeger, 2009; Perry-Burney & Jennings, 2003). This undermines the programmatic focus necessary for community-based agencies to provide quality job training and employment support services for low-income jobseekers. Second, when faced with the pressure to monitor and report on economic outcomes instead of the individual development process, an administration-service divide can take place (Harvey, Hong, & Kwaza, 2010). Administrators often are forced to benchmark tangible economic outcomes for continued funding, while practitioners adhere to the mission of engaging the clients in an intangible empowerment process.

According to a study by Thaden and Robinson (2010), this dichotomy exists even among the staff of state welfare organizations. The dominant narrative of the staff viewed success as client compliance—much like the administrators—and the alternative narrative suggested a

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liberatory organizational culture shift to redefine the notion of success as client well-being—similar to the practitioners' view of client empowerment. This dilemma contextualizes the current state of community practice for local agencies. They are doomed if they follow their mission to empower the most vulnerable and disconnected workers to become motivated and work ready without an immediate employment outcome. They also are doomed if they allow themselves to become employer dependent and celebrate their short-term success by placing people in employment only to find a large turnover problem among them.

Therefore, SS is a significant issue requiring further examination. This paper presents a follow-up study to an earlier focus group evaluation of a St. Louis-based workforce development program (Hong, Sheriff, & Naeger, 2009) seeks to shed light on the client-centered comprehensive definition of SS. Using a mixed method approach, this study triangulates qualitative data from three follow-up focus groups and quantitative survey data from the same workforce development site. Three focus groups—a service provider group, an early stage client group, and the graduate group—were asked to define SS from their perspectives. Using preliminary results derived from the focus groups, a survey questionnaire was developed and circulated to a cohort of clients at the site. Findings from this study contribute to future empowerment-based evaluations in workforce development for low-income jobseekers.

### **BACKGROUND LITERATURE**

When examining the basic definition of SS offered by the Webster's Dictionary, cited by Fineman (2004), the concept has to do with: (1) being able to supply one's ... own needs without external assistance; and (2) having extreme confidence in one's own resources or powers (p.7). It is unquestionable that the most commonly accepted definition of SS in policy and workforce development programs has been the former economic and financial one, and thus the term

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economic SS (ESS). The Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA: U.S. Public Law 105-220) endorses this economic definition based on the combined function of employment, retention, independence, and earnings status of low-income individuals. In order to contextualize SS within the local economy, area-specific definitions are left to the local bodies to decide. One can find this in the Final Rule Section 663.230 of WIA:

State Boards or Local Boards must set the criteria for determining whether employment leads to SS. At a minimum, such criteria must provide that SS means employment that pays at least the lower living standard income level (LLSIL)<sup>1</sup>, as defined in WIA section 101(24). SS for a dislocated worker may be defined in relation to a percentage of the layoff wage. The special needs of individuals with disabilities or other barriers to employment should be taken into account when setting criteria to determine SS.

Most social service agencies are evaluated based on these economic and financially driven definitions of SS. Performance-based government contracting has increased particularly at the state level “in an effort to incentivize contractors and ensure alignment with program and funding goals and targets” (Van Slyke, 2007). Aligning with the federal government’s main focus on ESS, most state welfare agencies have transformed their organizational cultures by adhering to stricter regulations encouraging economic outcomes rather than to promoting client well-being (Thaden & Robinson, 2010). On the other hand, these performance-based contracting relationships for nonprofit organizations can result in unintended consequences of mission drift and funding dependency (Alexander, Nank, and Stiffers 1999; Kramer 1994; Saidel 1991).

For nonprofit organizations, it becomes problematic when services are rendered based upon their mission to address psychological conceptualizations of SS while program performance is evaluated based on ESS outcomes. For example, in the process of providing services to assist clients achieve SS by empowering them and preparing them to be job ready, service providers often face the difficulty of having to immediately identify whether they have met funders’

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<sup>1</sup> LLSIL is a poverty measure created by the Department of Labor that uses the minimum family budget approach (U.S. Department of Labor Employment and Training Administration, n.d.).

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indicators of program success (Harvey, Hong, & Kwaza, 2010) — i.e., employment, earnings, and retention. By doing so, the ‘process’ of transforming clients from being discouraged and disconnected jobseekers to becoming empowered workers is overlooked when evaluating agency or program performance. Within the current state of ‘market dependent’ service delivery systems that reward job placement and retention outcomes, preparing people for jobs by enhancing their marketability or ‘employability’ with soft skills is not adequately measured.

While work has become the principal economic safety net, many low-income and low-skilled job seekers continue to face multiple employment barriers at the individual level — i.e., health, personal attitude, family, skills, etc. — that limit their marketability (Danziger et al., 2000; Ellerbe et al., 2011; Nam, 2005; Santiago & Galster, 2004). Potential structural barriers for workers entering the low-wage market — skills mismatch and spatial mismatch — place these agencies at odds with the multiple systems that obstruct SS for individuals (Henly, 2000; Hong & Wernet, 2007). Programs that benchmark ESS outcomes continue to struggle when the supply and demand side of the labor market, exogenous to the agency setting, cannot be adequately matched. This phenomenon escalated during the recent Great Recession when the unemployment rate climbed to nearly 10% (U.S. Department of Labor, 2010). This could inevitably lead to a reduction or termination of funding for many agencies and thereby decrease access to needed services by vulnerable jobseekers in need (Harvey, Hong, & Kwaza, 2010).

Conducting evaluations based on ESS as the success metric, which coincides with the proliferation of performance-based contracting of government job training programs, agencies are set up for failure when the likelihood of success is low in such demand-side, market dependent systems (Lafer, 2004). Adding to that are inadequate program funding and administration, which have been the common characteristics of training programs for low-income individuals, making

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them less than effective (Grubb, 1995). WIA is underfunded and only a fraction of people in need of training and employment services are able to receive them (Baider, 2008). Between 1998 and 2003, there was a 17% decline in the number of workers receiving training under WIA (Frank & Minoff, 2005). Moreover, publicly funded training programs in general have had to endure a mismatch between the level of investments and the skills deficits they have to fill, particularly the middle-skills gap in more recent years (Hilliard, 2013; LaLonde, 1995).

Classroom skills training funded by the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) (Orr et al., 1996) and other training and short-term educational programs (Hamilton, 2002) have contributed little to the earnings of welfare recipients. When training has had any effects on increasing earnings, the gains are not enough to lift people out of poverty (Gueron & Hamilton, 2002; Heckman, LaLonde, & Smith, 1999; Lafer, 2004; LaLonde, 1995). Similar findings are revealed in MDRC's recent evaluation of New York City's Opportunity NYC—Work Rewards demonstration (Verma et al., 2012) which suggests that FSS programs have been unable to reach their employment and asset building goals.

Welfare-to-work evaluations have wrestled with the question of whether labor force attachment (LFA) or human capital development (HCD) strategies are more effective (Gueron & Hamilton, 2002; Kim, 2010) in building ESS. LFA programs that emphasize job search and work first have been considered the less expensive option to help welfare leavers build work experience and positive work habits and were adopted as the main engines of welfare reform (Loomis et al., 2004). On the other hand, HCD is a longer-term option that involves skill-building and basic education (Gueron & Hamilton, 2002). Findings on program effectiveness have been mixed: Hamilton et al. (2001) contend that LFA edges out HCD on employment and earnings while Gueron and Hamilton (2002) report no such differences. Kim (2010) recently supported earlier

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findings that LFA does not produce greater measurable effects on welfare exit relative to HCD.

Due to the lack of policy focus on the psychological empowerment pathway to economic success, empirical studies examining the psychological dimension of SS are sparse (Gowdy & Pearlmutter, 1993, 1994; Hong, Sheriff, & Naeger, 2009; Santiago & Galster, 2004). A recent study by Weigensberg et al. (2012) looks into the black box of factors that make workforce development programs successful. Among various multilevel factors, comprehensively addressing client needs including psychological barriers was found to be one of key factor. Heckman (2012/13) reports that soft skills or non-cognitive skills—i.e., openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and emotional stability—contribute significantly to various success outcomes.

Supporting the growing interest in psychological SS (PSS), Hong, Sheriff, and Naeger (2009) found that a bottom-up, client definition of SS reflects a multifaceted concept of ‘employment hope,’ which is composed of psychological empowerment (the agency component of hope) and forward progress toward career goals (the pathways component of hope). Psychological empowerment comprises self-worth, perceived capabilities, and future outlook while the goal-oriented pathway consists of self-motivation, utilization of skills and resources, and goal orientation. While these preliminary findings are suggestive, they are limited to the perspectives of one focus group of later-stage workforce development program participants. In order to develop a more comprehensive description of client-centered SS, this study asks the following research question: How do service providers and clients define SS?

## **METHODS**

### *Research Design*

This study employed a mixed method approach by integrating qualitative (Qual) and



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quantitative (Quant) methods. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2011), there are three approaches to mixed methods research—merging data, connecting data, and embedding data. This study involved connecting data by using an exploratory sequential design (Qual→Quant) (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Lieber, 2009). Qualitative analysis of focus group data and a descriptive correlational analysis of survey data were combined. As a follow-up study to Hong, Sheriff, & Naeger (2009), a theoretical sample of service providers, early-stage clients, and graduates focus groups from the same workforce development site in St. Louis were asked to define SS from their perspectives. Based on qualitative analyses of these focus group data, client surveys were developed and administered to explore the extent to which quantitative data support the qualitative findings.

First, Qual data analysis was conducted by using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1992). Transcripts and memos from the three focus groups were free coded in Atlas-ti and analyzed using the constant comparison method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), which involved cross-group comparing and contrasting the conceptual categories and their intensity. Analyses from Hong, Sheriff, & Naeger's (2009) earlier focus group study set the stage for the staff focus group. Conceptual similarities and differences were discerned, new categories were formed, and the boundaries of categories were reconfigured and strengthened. This process continued until conceptual saturation was reached, the point at which no new categories were revealed. Hypothesizing that definitions of SS would vary from early stage clients to the graduate group, two new focus groups were conducted with these groups, thereby establishing the theoretical sampling. Multiple iterations of comparing and contrasting incidents related to each category. Axial and selective coding of these emerging categories helped generate and refine the grounded theory.

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As for the subsequent Quant component, survey development was informed by the qualitative findings. A survey instrument was developed to examine the degree to which respondents endorsed various dimensions of service provider and client-defined SS that resulted from the focus group discussions. Also included were psychometric scales that measured positive psychological properties and dimensions of psychological and economic self-sufficiency such as hope, self-esteem, self-efficacy, employment hope, employment barriers, and economic self-sufficiency. These scales were selected to validate the key statements that represent the elements of the comprehensive definition of SS that emerged from the qualitative findings. Basic univariate and bivariate (i.e., correlation analysis) were conducted using the quantitative survey data to confirm the findings from qualitative analysis.

### *Research Site and Procedure*

The Metropolitan Education and Training (MET) Center is a strategic partnership created to stimulate ESS of individuals living in low-income communities of the St. Louis region. The Center seeks to accomplish this mission by delivering focused, comprehensive, and accessible job training, placement, assessment, career development services and transportation services. Serving the underemployed, unemployed, and displaced workers striving for sustainable work, it provides comprehensive skill-based training, focused individual employment planning, and accessible career development and placement services, and personal financial education/transportation services.

The MET Center's client-centered practice fully focuses on the multi-dimensionality of SS. A client is provided with individualized guidance to develop self-worth, perceived capability, motivation, resource and skills capacity, and goal orientation (Hong, Sheriff, & Naeger, 2009). However, no attempt has been made to measure direct outcomes to these efforts. The SS definition

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that the MET Center has been using to officially measure its success for program participants is ‘finding affordable jobs and maintaining those jobs for more than 12 months’ (Fleischer, 2001). The MET Center highlights accomplishments based on this economic view of SS as reported to its funders. Concerned that continuing with this approach will be met with many challenges if the low-wage labor market simply cannot absorb those who are moving into these jobs, a series of focus groups and a follow up survey were proposed as part of a comprehensive evaluation of their programs and services.

Based on the researcher’s ongoing relationship with this workforce development site, the MET Center helped recruit participants for three focus groups by identifying and scheduling an optimal day and time for service providers, announcing and distributing flyers at the orientation for early-stage clients, and reaching out to recent graduates to come back on an evening after work. Each focus group was videotaped with participant consent and transcribed by the research assistant. Survey participants were recruited from one cohort group in the later-stage of MET Center’s job training program (n=61) after all the focus group participants had graduated. The survey was administered during their class by an administrator who had no direct contact with clients and everyone in the cohort completed the survey.

### *Sample Description*

The first focus group (Group 1) included all 15 MET Center staff (9 women and 6 men) who work directly with the clients as counselors and instructors for job readiness and skills training programs. Participants in Group 1 were relatively older (age range was between early 40s to late 50s). Two follow-up client focus groups were conducted from earlier stage participants (Group 2) and former program participants (Group 3). Group 2 consisted of five individuals whose ages ranged from the early 20s to the mid-40s. Group 3 included individuals who

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successfully completed the program from the MET Center and obtained employment. This group consisted of 9 members (5 women and 4 men) who have become or were close to becoming self-sufficient based on the Center's definition (finding a job and keeping it for 12 months). The age range of Group 3 participants was between the early 20s to mid-40s. Most participants in these groups were African American.

The typical survey respondent (n=61) was approximately 28 years old, female (97%), and African-American (95%). Almost all were either never married, separated, or divorced (95%) and heads of households with children under 18 (98%). The average number of children in the household were 2.2. About 25% had less than high school education, another 29% had completed high school or a GED and 42% of respondents had completed some college. Approximately 44% had never received any professional job training. The majority were currently unemployed (93%); however, respondents had, on average, 8.56 years of work experience. Nine out of ten respondents were receiving welfare (91%) benefits. These characteristics are typical of program participants at the MET Center.

## RESULTS

### *Qualitative Findings: Staff and client definition of SS*

**ESS.** Participants in all groups initially suggested a threshold definition of SS and some were unyielding in their emphasis on SS as a financial outcome. Particularly strong endorsements of ESS were found in Groups 2 and 3. Consistent with the conventional definition in the policy world, "having enough money to support yourself to not have to struggle" (Group 2) was a common worldview. However, Group 2 also was rather unrealistic in conceptualizing ESS as getting rich and buying whatever things whenever you wanted. ESS was an abstract, at times unrealistic goal, but certainly one that dominated their perception of SS.

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Group 3 had a sense of ESS as the desired outcome in the labor market. Although people would have different needs, finding a good job and living within their means are thought to provide them with financial security. For one to be self-sufficient, particularly highlighted was the importance of having “the ability to care for, maintain, and nurture yourself, have a high level quality of life, and have something left over” (Group 3). This extra money would come from some sort of personal safety net that individuals would have been saving. SS is “everything ... plus a plan B ... Always having something else you know you can rely on” (Group 3).

Being self-sufficient meant not only being financially secure, but also having to “pay your bills and not depend on anyone else” (Group 3). As harsh as it may sound, Group 3 considered SS as doing whatever it took independently to make ends meet by “pulling oneself up by the bootstraps.” They were accepting of the existence of poverty and society’s indifference to it as reality: “No one is going to give you anything; you have to work for it” (Group 3). Working and not being dependent on anyone including government assistance were the primary means by which one could achieve SS. While Group 2 was unclear about what it takes to “make it”, SS for them was about “making it without any help ... without the government.” Group 1 provided a more general and balanced view of the economic definition of SS.

SS in my mind is finance, occupation, relying on yourself so you get to a point that you can provide for yourself and you make a decision to live a positive life (Group 1).

**Denial of ESS.** The complexity of the term started to unveil once this initial discussion on SS opened up the question of what level of financial security and independence were to be considered sufficient. Some service providers expressed frustrations with the vagueness of the term and one respondent even used the word “utopia” (Group 1) to suggest that ESS is something that one could never reach and that everyone would need to receive assistance from someone in one way or another.

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I don't know if you can ever be completely self-sufficient, you are always going to need assistance from someone, and you always are going to need someone else. No matter how self-sufficient you are, you are going to need somebody ... you won't be completely self-sufficient (Group 3).

If a static, outcome-based ESS alone cannot adequately reflect a realistic, client-centered definition of SS, what then is in the black box of SS? Service providers suggested that "it may not just have to do with finances ... it's a state of mind," (Group 1) suggesting a psychological dimension of SS. Getting clients a job and moving them off of the welfare rolls is no guarantee of SS. Respondents felt that the definition of SS depended 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 to many respondents that is relative to personal needs.

Policymakers see it as a very narrow thing ... if [clients] get a job [they] don't have to pay for this out of a budget. We focus on personalized development through (an) Individual Education Plan (IEP) with employment being the main goal, but they want immediate gratification and they want to skip everything we are talking about and go straight to placement. So I think that the bureaucracy doesn't really want to take the long term approach to the solution. All they want is the quick fix with employment, and the job concept is a short term concept versus career and if you look at these jobs it's temporary (Group 1).

**PSS.** If ESS is a success outcome, then what constitutes the process of reaching this goal? While the long-term goal of SS may ultimately be about reaching a financial success outcome by being able to take care of oneself, respondents agreed that one would have to be psychologically self-sufficient on their path to ESS. Not only does PSS have to be the precursor to ESS, but also a key element to keep balance with ESS once one reaches that goal.

You deal with a lot of clients who have emotional issues, mental issues, so not having a job is almost the least of the problems that they have. Because if they can't deal with the emotional and physical things that are going on, they can't hold on to a job and they will be right back where they started (Group 1).

PSS is composed of employment hope and perceived employment barriers. Consistent with the preceding focus group study, employment hope has two components—psychological

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empowerment and goal oriented pathway (Hong, Sheriff, & Naeger, 2009; Hong, Polanin, & Pigott, 2012). Perceived employment barriers included health, personal, family, human capital, and other structural labor market dimensions.

For Group 2, a more meaningful process from unrealistically thinking about having more money is the process of moving toward goals. The goal-oriented pathway is a component of employment hope and it comprises futuristic self-motivation, utilization of skills and resources, and goal orientation. *Futuristic self-motivation* involves determining for oneself that a career path is a possibility and motivating oneself to look toward the ‘new horizon’ for potential future success. SS to some participants is recognizing that “there are lots of opportunities out there and now I have choices” and being motivated “knowing that I [am able] to go after whatever I need to do to ...” (Group 3).

You have to say what do I need to do to make things better? Do I need to get there earlier, I get there earlier. Do I need to be faster, do I need to learn more? You need to be that person who is going to tell yourself. That is what SS is to me; we have too many people just waiting and when the job ends it’s over ... (Group 3).

Being aware of one’s *skills and resources* and being able to utilize them is a necessary element of the goal-oriented pathway as one moves toward career goals. It is about “getting them skills and work, and housing,” particularly focusing on “job readiness” as they relate to finding good jobs (Group 1). One participant emphasized that helping low-income individuals become self-sufficient will require “some type of stability and they will be able to get out and be a go getter” (Group 2). This stability is ensured when people have the skills and resources in line with the goals they want to achieve. It helps “being balanced in every area of your life and have resources or the ability to get resources to maintain that balance” (Group 1).

Unless you put your body and your mind into movement towards [goals] you are not getting anywhere ... I will do anything to move towards my dream and ... Right now I

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have the skill to go get the house and fix it with some help ... I am closer to my goal now than a couple of years ago when I had no skills at all (Group 3).

I personally think once you decide that you are going to be committed to something in a direction ... you are going to get the resources you need to keep moving toward the goals. It's all in that first commitment to get there (Group 1).

*Goal orientation* has to do with being on the road and in the process of moving forward toward career goals. It is also the conviction that one is on the right path and ESS will be achieved sometime in the future. It is important to find a "possible goal," not one that unrealistically exists in some wild dreams (Group 2). This is an ongoing lifelong process: "You have to have some kind of goal ... there is no ceiling to being self-sufficient ... even Bill Gates, he has to constantly re-work Microsoft so Apple does not take over" (Group 3). Service providers saw this as key to defining SS: "I think that being able to determine some of your own goals, objectives, and being able to maintain yourself by doing that is the key" (Group 1). By helping clients move forward, one participant in Group 1 stated, "if I am able to help someone from one level to the next, then ... [this is] what I consider SS."

I think it starts with the mind in that the human development aspect of it and the part that is missing is understanding your role toward your own development ... SS is always a progression, it's never a spot that you get to (Group 1).

Service providers and clients alike affirmed the importance of psychological empowerment as the other component of employment hope. Group 2 did not quite perceive this component to be part of their progress toward ESS, beyond the point of setting and striving for goals. Groups 1 and 3 found this to be a key factor in the real world of jobs. *Self-worth* as a positive psychological attribute also makes a significant difference as one participant stated, "In life, you can make it if you have a positive attitude" (Group 1), and another respondent conceptualizing SS as: "now I am more valuable, that is SS" (Group 3).



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The first thing in SS to me is liking yourself. Our clients are not really taught or discussed to liking themselves. If they like themselves they are willing to strive to struggle to become self-sufficient ... if you like yourself then you will have the confidence to strive to be even better to find that job that fits you (Group 1).

Respondents were quite clear that self-worth leads to developing the level of confidence that one can control life outcomes by conquering the obstacles at both personal and institutional levels: “If you say to yourself I can’t, I am not going to get nowhere in life, then you won’t” (Group 1). The sense of *perceived capability* to successfully enter, stay resilient, and complete the journey to employment and upward mobility was the other element of psychological empowerment. It involves overcoming the feeling of fear generated by current financial insecurity in the workforce that limits one’s ability to combat life’s obstacles to stay employed (Group 3).

So what I do in a three week period is to get them [clients] to the spot where they are saying I can do this, I have to know the path to take, I am physically and mentally well, so now I can set my priorities ... to be SS (Group 1).

All three focus groups noted that one of the two pillars of PSS that complements employment hope is perceived employment barriers (PEB). ESS would be difficult to achieve when major barriers to employment exist and compromise employment hope. It may be that “people have problems with drugs and alcohol, and stuff like that keep them from getting a job” (Group 2). Not being able to afford childcare and transportation could take away from all efforts to find good jobs and achieve ESS (Group 3). While clients may have multiple barriers, those who are disconnected from the labor market may tend to have unrealistic sense of self and barriers. Often, barriers are not perceived as barriers until clients start the forward progress toward goals and seek the necessary resources to overcome them in their quest for ESS. It is important to balance PEB with employment hope as it helps clients to:

... understand all the different challenges that are stopping you from doing what it is that you need to do or want to do in your life ... Yes, but we need to be able to conquer the

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obstacles ...because you cannot quit and that comes from strong will, strong mind, strong spirit, strong confidence ... (Group 1).

**From PSS to ESS.** Group 1 and Group 3 respondents both saw ESS as an important fruitful outcome that realizes the process of PSS. These two groups agreed that PSS is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for achieving ESS and that both PSS and ESS are important polar dimensions of the larger concept of SS. ESS is the reality check that allows for sustaining or weakening the level of PSS one may reach. In fact, having a good job will reinforce and further strengthen PSS as one moves forward. ESS is also about becoming financially literate and developing financial stability as one maintains PSS at a reasonably high level. Service providers offered an overarching comprehensive definition of SS including those of other groups:

You have to see that you have value, you have worth, you are important, period. Then that person is willing to extend themselves, invest themselves to do whatever it is because now this is something I am doing for me (Group 1).

So it's the combination of the two ... the mental and the financial both has to be there ... it's something that is together ... (Group 1).

To ensure that the interpretation of the focus group data was accurate, member checking was performed with the original 15 service providers six months after their participation in the focus group. Member checking (Russell & Gregory, 2003) is “the process of seeking clarification and further explanation from study participants to ensure participants’ viewpoints have been faithfully interpreted” (Truong, Wyllie, Bailie, & Austin, 2012, p.204). Preliminary findings were presented to the group, which helped evaluate interpretive variability and ensured internal validity. Every service provider agreed that the interpretation accurately captured the comprehensive definition of ESS emerging from the group. No concerns were raised about the research process or findings. They suggested conducting a quantitative survey of later-stage program participants on key elements of these definitions and other psychometric scales that overlap with their

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conceptualization of SS.

### *Quantitative Findings: Client definition of SS*

The survey instrument that was administered to job training participants included the following measures to capture some key concepts revealed in the qualitative findings. The WEN Economic Self-sufficiency Scale (ESS) (15 items; Gowdy & Pearlmutter, 1993) was used to measure ESS. And various concepts that reflect elements of PSS were included in the quantitative analysis, such as the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (10 items; Blaskovich & Tomaka, 1991); the General Self-Efficacy Scale (8 items; Chen, Gully, & Eden, 2001); the Snyder Hope Scale (8 items; Snyder et al., 1991); and Employment Hope Scale (14 items; Hong, Polanin, & Pigott, 2012). The 27 PEB questions have not yet been validated as a scale but were used individually by each item.

Exploratory correlation analyses were conducted to test the bivariate relationships among these scales. ESS was positively correlated with two psychological measures: self-efficacy ( $r=.36$ ,  $p<.01$ ) and employment hope ( $r=.39$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Employment hope was found to be correlated positively with hope ( $r=.43$ ,  $p<.01$ ), self-efficacy ( $r=.51$ ,  $p<.001$ ), and ESS ( $r=.39$ ,  $p<.01$ ). It is important to note that employment hope captures similar aspects of agency and goal-oriented pathway as general hope, but general hope is not associated with ESS. Employment hope, self-efficacy, and ESS are associated with one another, which tentatively supports the PSS process to ESS outcome hypothesis suggested in the qualitative findings.

Out of the 27 PEB items assessed on a 10-point scale, clients perceived the following top barrier items presented in the order of severity—child care [single parenthood (6.49), having young children (6.44), and child care (6.17)], human capital [job skills (5.37), job information (5.34), job experience (4.99), and education (4.68)], labor market [no jobs in the community (4.26), work clothing (4.17), and no jobs that match my skills (4.15)], and other [stable housing (4.97) and

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discrimination (4.21)]. These individual barriers items correlated negatively with employment hope, possibly reflecting how these dynamic forces may be dimensions of PSS. They also were highly correlated with one another, indicating co-occurrence of multiple barriers among clients as suggested in the qualitative findings.

Clients were also asked to rate on a 10-point scale the degree to which they agree or disagree on 14 statements that reflect major findings from the qualitative analysis. Respondents, for the most part, reported as currently being self-sufficient (7.61) and disagreed with the statement that “no one can realistically become self-sufficient” (3.00). The scores for financial definitions of SS tended to be lower on average—ranging from 4.93 to 7.92—compared to those of the psychological counterpart—ranging from 8.47 to 9.05 (see Table 1). Defining SS as not receiving assistance from anyone had the lowest score by far (4.93); while self-motivation and goal orientation received the highest (9.05).

There was a strong correlation among three financial definitions of SS—being able to pay all my bills, saving money for rainy days, and not worrying about turning to the streets. And positive correlation was found among definitions reflecting six dimensions of employment hope—self-worth, perceived capability, future outlook, self-motivation, skills and resources, and goal orientation—as reported by Hong, Sheriff, & Naeger, 2009. Believing oneself to be self-sufficient correlated positively with goal orientation ( $r=.29, p<.05$ ), ESS ( $r=.34, p<.05$ ), and employment hope ( $r=.46, p<.001$ ). Perceiving that no one can realistically be self-sufficient correlated positively with defining SS as not receiving any financial assistance ( $r=.39, p<.01$ ) and negatively with skills and resources ( $r=-.27, p<.05$ ), hope ( $r=-.39, p<.01$ ), and employment hope ( $r=-.28, p<.05$ ).

There is a stronger individual tendency for the later stage program participants to endorse

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the psychological definition of SS. After summing up all the financial and psychological definitions separately, a matched sample t-test was conducted to examine the degree to which individual average scores for each differed. The results indicated that clients adhered to the psychological definitions of SS to a greater level (mean=8.62) than the financial ones (mean=6.60) [ $t(55)=-6.35, p<.001$ ]. This is consistent with the qualitative findings reported by Hong, Sheriff, & Naeger (2009) and summarized in Table 1.

[Table 1 about here]

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

SS as a financial outcome was the point of departure for discussion in all focus groups [box (1) in Figure 1]. ESS was contested for its unrealistic idealism and relativism in Groups 1 and 3 [box (2)] similar to the previous focus group study with later stage participants (Hong, Sheriff, & Naeger, 2009). Denying the legitimacy of ESS as the only dominant outcome reflected that SS was not all about money or financial outcome (Gowdy & Pearlmutter, 1994), while a small camp of participants in each group continued to maintain that financial outcome needed to be the ultimate definition of SS. A dialectical process that involved divergence and convergence synthesized the two polar views into a client-centered, comprehensive definition that outlined a psychological process towards one's economic outcome.

[Figure 1 about here]

This emic definition, or locally relevant understanding, of SS has to do with (1) PSS as the process component of SS [(a) psychological empowerment (self-worth and perceived capability); (b) goal-oriented pathway (futuristic self-motivation; utilization of skills and resources; and goal-orientation); and (c) perceived employment barriers] and (2) ESS as the outcome component of SS [(a) financial security and (b) independence]. Client-centered definitions vary by group and

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tend to be nested within the wide reach of service providers' definition. Group 1 serving as the reference group, Group 3 generated the most comprehensive client definition incorporating both ESS and PSS but with greater emphasis on connecting to psychological empowerment than goal-oriented pathway as they live out the tough realities in the labor market. This was affirmed by the later stage clients from the previous study who suggested a client definition conforming more to the PSS component of service provider definition (Hong, Sheriff, & Naeger, 2009). The definition developed by Group 2 was sporadic and unrealistic in terms of capturing the full range of service provider definition but with a strong sense of goal-oriented pathway [see Table 2].

[Table 2 about here]

Findings suggest that service providers and clients view SS differently than the traditional policy, funder, and program definitions. SS as defined by service providers is comprehensive in nature and reflects both ESS and PSS—PSS comprising employment hope (psychological empowerment and goal-oriented pathway) and PEB [see Table 2 and Figure 1]. It represents a psychological transformative process to reaching an economic outcome. In fact, service providers seem to shape client views of SS based on the empowerment perspective and help broaden their 'possible selves' (Oyserman, Bybee, Terry, & Hart-Johnson, 2004). This process involves developing employment hope within the new realities of career goals and overcoming perceived employment barriers toward individualized success goals.

The theory of change that emerged from the findings suggests that SS is a transformative process that involves reframing unrealistic economic goals and getting individuals on the goal-oriented pathway (i.e., Group 2 moving from ① to ②) which, in turn, fosters psychological empowerment as one enters and progresses in the labor market (i.e., later stage group moving from ② to ③ and Group 3 moving from ③ to ④) [see Figure 2]. The process of developing PSS helps

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one achieve realistic ESS outcomes in the long-run. This process reflects the pathways model of SS corresponding to the four quadrants—moving from ① disconnected, ② discouraged, and ③ motivated to become ④ empowered workers—as identified by Hong, Sheriff, & Naeger (2009). Focusing on goal-oriented pathways for Group 2 and psychological empowerment for the later stage group and Group 3 seems critical to this progress in terms of fostering resilience in the face of multiple employment barriers.

[Figure 2 about here]

This study further uncovers that employment hope is one important component of PSS along with PEB and that both PSS and ESS make up the comprehensive definition of SS. Theoretically speaking, employment hope is a pre-labor market developmental prerequisite as one begins to deal with the realities of employment barriers (Hong, In Press). How one perceives the weight of employment barriers can potentially mute all efforts of developing employment hope and truncate one's path to ESS. Therefore, balancing of the two components is essential for one to become psychologically self-sufficient. Furthermore, PSS is a necessary but not necessarily a sufficient condition for achieving ESS. One's labor market position within a short period of time after leaving the training program can provide the reality check on how sustainable the PSS development process could be.

There are several limitations to the study. First, the rigor of the research design would have been strengthened if focus groups also were conducted with clients who dropped out of the program or did not become self-sufficient after graduating from the program. Unfortunately, this could not be undertaken because follow-up contact information for these clients became unavailable soon after they left the program. Second, this is an exploratory one-site, one-city study. The transferability of findings generated from this study requires further replication and

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confirmation. Third, the quantitative part of this mixed methods study was based upon a small sample of program participants and included only one client group. In order to further validate study findings, additional data need to be collected from early-stage clients (Group 2) and graduate groups (Group 3). Finally, follow-up studies will need to be conducted with different programs and geographic areas to test the tentative theoretical claims of this study.

The process of deriving a client-centered definition of SS provides implications for social work practice particularly in light of benchmarking SS in community-based agencies. Weigensberg et al. (2012) recommend establishing a more integrated data system measuring program processes and outcomes, particularly for individual clients by subpopulations, characteristics, and employment barriers in order to develop risk-adjusted performance expectations. While PSS is found to be a precursor to individual's ESS and a direct reflection of what services are offered to clients, it is uncommon for such short-term and intermediate benchmarks to measure the 'process' in community-based agency settings. While the long-term financial achievement after finding jobs is a function of many things outside of the social service or workforce development input, ESS remains to be the dominant success benchmark (Hong, Polanin, & Pigott, 2012). PSS can be benchmarked to monitor how the process of change in individuals contributes to program completion and job retention outcomes.

Within the context of long-term evaluation of success in workforce development, social workers can contribute to the transformational PSS process—developing employment hope and reducing PEBS (Hong, In Press). Employment hope-building and maintaining strategies can include: (1) individualized employment plan and goal-setting; (2) support services that provide psychological empowerment and remove barriers blocking the drive and pathway; (3) reassessment and revision of goals; and (4) evaluation based on the short-term or mid-range



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achievement of the PSS process.

In conclusion, community-based agencies providing job training and employment support services struggle when the system of evaluating their effectiveness becomes so market-driven. This paper is about reconceptualizing the self-sufficiency benchmark that best reflects the process of client development and empowerment. PSS can serve as a tool for evaluating the ‘process’ of community practice as an interim benchmark for outputs that can translate to long-term labor market outcomes, particularly employment retention. This provides the process-driven interim tool for evaluating community practice, by which community-based agencies can become empowered as social change agents vis-à-vis the market and employers. Agencies can market their own graduates who not only possess the skills and credentials to be employed, but also with their motivation level reflected by PSS. This type of bottom-up community organizing method can nudge employers to compete equally for most motivated and empowered jobseekers graduating from programs offered by community-based organizations. In doing so, labor market matching can shift from the state of community-based organizations being dependent on the employers to that with a good equilibrium between the labor supply and demand.

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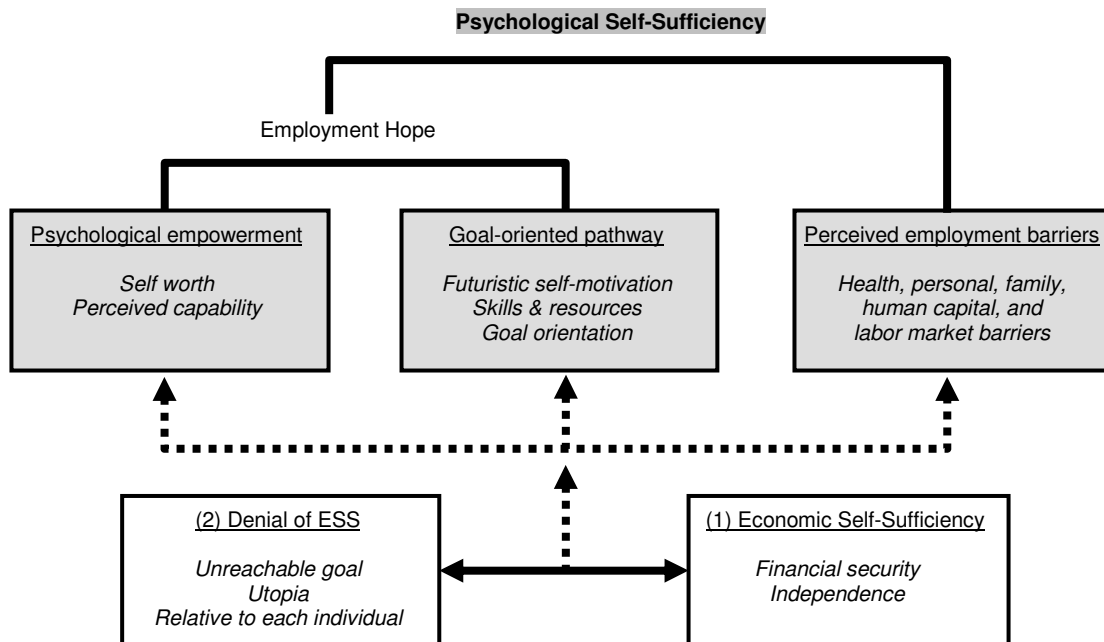
**Table 1: Client definition of SS from quantitative survey**

Key content areas of SS		Definitions and elements	Mean [0-10]
Economic SS	Financial outcome	SS is about not receiving any assistance from anyone, agency, or government	4.93
		SS is having enough money to pay all my bills	6.36
		SS is having some money saved up for the rainy day	7.05
		SS is not worrying about turning to the streets	7.00
		SS is having a good job	7.92
Psychological SS (Employment hope)	Psychological empowerment	SS is believing in my self-worth (self-worth)	8.75
		SS is believing that I can make it one day (perceived capability)	8.64
		SS is knowing that my life will be better tomorrow than today (future outlook)	8.60
	Goal-oriented pathway	SS is staying motivated without getting discouraged (self-motivation)	9.05
		SS is being able to utilize the skills and resources (skills & resources)	8.47
		SS is the process of moving towards my goals (goal orientation)	9.05

**Table 2: Presence of psychological SS elements by each focus group**

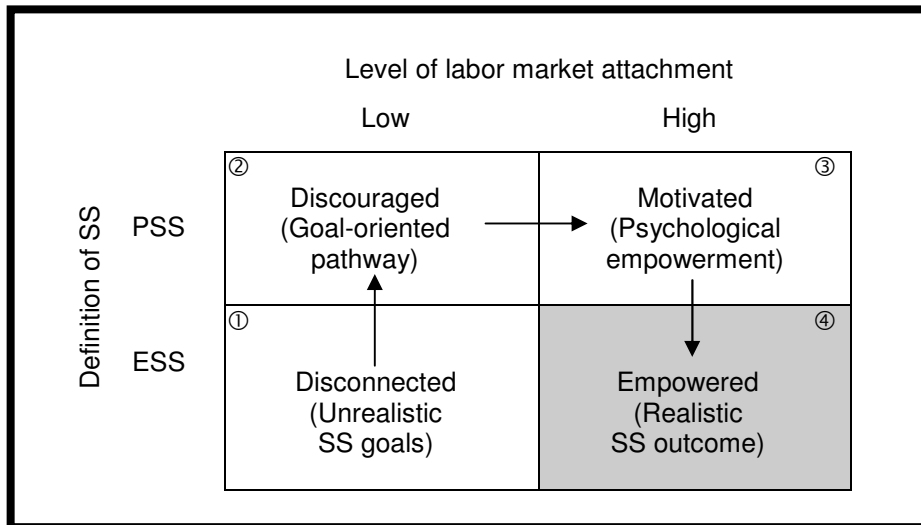
Key content areas of SS	Elements	Service providers (Group 1)	Clients			
			Early stage (Group 2)	Later stage (Hong et al., 2009)	Graduates (Group 3)	
Economic SS	Financial outcome	Economic security	X	X	-	X
		Independence	X	X	-	X
Psychological SS	Psychological empowerment	Self worth	X	-	X	X
		Perceived capability	X	-	X	X
	Goal-oriented pathway	Self-motivation	X	X	X	-
		Resources and skills	X	X	X	-
		Goal orientation	X	X	X	-
Perceived employment barriers	Perception of multiple barriers	X	X	X	X	

**Figure 1: Process of forming a client-centered definition of self-sufficiency**



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Figure 2: SS as a process of psychological transformation



Revised from Hong, Sheriff, & Naeger (2009)