

Episode 253- Dr. Philip Hong: Support, Employment Hope and Economic Self-Sufficiency Among Low-Income Job Seekers

[00:00:08] Welcome to inSocialWork, the podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at www.inSocialWork.org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of inSocialWork is to engage practitioners and researchers in lifelong learning and to promote research to practice and practice to research. We educate. We connect. We care. We're inSocialWork.

[00:00:38] Hi from Buffalo! As you know we don't sit around waiting for winter to end around here. Our public ice rinks are opening and ice skating downtown at Rotary Rink and at Canal Side where you can skate or ride these crazy ice bike things. Your choice. Whatever you do get out there. I'm Peter Sobota. How self-sufficient are you? Not so fast. Think about it for a minute. United States welfare reform policy and the measures utilized to construct and justify it largely focus on the self-sufficiency of the recipient or to paraphrase just pull up your bootstraps and if you do it'll work. In this episode our guest Dr. Philip Hong describes his work exploring how welfare reform efforts play out through the eyes and in the lives of the people living it. Utilizing the social justice and person in environment perspective, Dr. Hong describes what he's learning about the role of hope and psychological self-sufficiency as articulated by the client recipients, listening to their perspectives of the obstacles and barriers and how they experience empowerment over time. As you might imagine these participant narratives often run counter to the aims of policy makers and their principles. Dr. Hong emphasizes a bottom up approach that could transform the outcomes for recipients, policymakers and employers alike. Philip Hong Ph.D. is professor, Associate Dean for Research and the director for the Center of Research on Self-Sufficiency at the School of Social Work Loyola University Chicago. He is also a faculty associate of the Center for Social Development at Washington University in St. Louis. Dr. Hong was interviewed in September 2018 by our own Caitlin Beck, student in our MSWJD program and of course the all around podcast wizard here at inSocialWork podcast.

[00:02:30] Hi listeners! My name is Caitlin Beck and I'm a dual-degree student studying law and social work at the University at Buffalo. And I'm speaking today with Dr. Philip Hong, Professor, Associate Dean for Research and director at the Center for Research on Self-Sufficiency at the School of Social Work Loyola University, Chicago. Thanks for being with us Philip.

[00:02:49] Thank you for inviting. It's great to be here.

[00:02:52] We're really excited to have you. So you started your work as a general poverty researcher and have gone on to publish widely on the issue of self-sufficiency and workforce development. Can you tell us about how you came to start this work and even about the nuances of your work over time?

[00:03:10] Well thank you so much for asking that question and it's so important to start there to tell my story of how things have evolved as starting from a poverty researcher in general looking at the overall U.S. population and what social determinants and other factors contribute to the causes of poverty amongst U.S. general population of the United States. And that's how I started my journey, just asking why broad stroke questions about poverty as a researcher coming out of the Ph.D. program at Washington University in St. Louis Browns School in 2003 and that's largely how I've been educated to look at big data sets to do statistical analysis on factors that contribute to poverty. When I started my faculty position at St. Louis University I was closely tied to a center called Center for Social Justice Education and Research within the school of social work and time was called School of Social Services. That prompted me to ask some questions that are rooted in the community and it had to be framed as a social justice question and I didn't know how best to pose those questions at the time I was in training but I just tried very hard and I was mentored by some

colleagues. At the time it was really helping me get grounded as a newbie researcher. And I would have to name Roy Ruckdeshell and John Slozar and the dean at the time was Susan Tad, who really helped me to think about this carefully from the point of view of the participants and programs who were living the realities of welfare to work as we have been living the transition of the welfare reform that's been pushing our folks out of welfare into jobs. And so that was how I approach this work in the beginning through a small grant that was awarded by the Center for Social Justice I went in with one MSW student and in partnership with a community partner to ask questions from ground up how one would see the realities of this welfare work. And the term self-sufficiency was the going language that represents the policy target goal, or to call it Success Goal, of the policy of welfare reform that we wanted to see how that is lived out successfully through the perceptions of people who are participating in job training programs, job readiness programs and community college adult education programs and so that was the approach. I didn't know what I was getting into at the time but that was the proposal which was then accepted for me to take the first step in. Interestingly this particular program was one of the larger demonstration sites of the NE Casey Foundation at the time called Regional Jobs Initiative, and St. Louis was one of the cities that they were evaluating as one of the demonstration cities along with Philadelphia, New Orleans, Milwaukee and Seattle. St. Louis was one of the five cities and that site had been one of the places where I've done my MSW internships to work closely to observe what goes on on the ground. I was invited back in by the agency as a faculty consultant evaluator to come in and look at why the agency definition which is provided by the Thunder, the Casey Foundation at the time, was defining self-sufficiency as an outcome defined as getting a job and keeping that job for 12 months or one full year. What I was asked at the time was whether a 20 percent success rate by that definition can be improved. And the program evaluation by conducting a series of focus groups of all stakeholders. How that could inform improvement of that performance based on the outcome metrics that were given the 12 month job retention can be improved. So that was where everything began. And I propose that we ask the clients or the participants how they define self-sufficiency from their own perspective, how they see this in their own reality and their lives. When that journey began I wasn't fully endorsed by an organization yet because the clients would be one of its stakeholders with staff and other providers and community college partners and others that we would be interviewing through focus groups. It was acceptable basically. And what I didn't know that was coming was there participant or a client perspective would be the overarching realities or that we'd overtake the entire definition or be one that is challenging or complementing the rhetoric of self-sufficiency that is coming from the policy world and the program implementation world, when it is commonly seen as an economic outcome. Economic self-sufficiency coming from the policy world where it is about getting out of welfare or off of public assistance and finding a job and earning enough money to pay for all the bills and make a living at a livable wage to sustain a family life is would be the common general definition of self-sufficiency as a concept of economic self-sufficiency. In fact the definition that we were able to learn from participants in these focus groups, or particularly with the clients were very different. It was about how they conquer the obstacles in life and continue to believe in the path of reaching that goal, whether it be employment, but it might be approaching various smaller step goals first and then getting to employment. And as long as one is in that process then one is considered self-sufficient. So moving forward, approaching that goal one step at a time, two steps forward one step back, two steps forward one step back, yet continuing to move forward. Progress would determine the process of self-sufficiency rather than an outcome based self-sufficiency that might be economic or financial. The process element that we've been calling it Psychological Self-Sufficiency and that would be sort of the two domains that would make up is the perceived barriers and hope. So hope would represent the two step forward and barriers would represent one step back.

[00:09:16] Philip, could you talk to us a little bit more about what your definition of hope is and more about how that hope relates to the barriers you're talking about?

[00:09:25] Thank you so much for that question too because it is one that I'm always learning more about as we learn from the focus groups. Originally it was where we would have multiple domains such as self-worth and having perceived capability and having futuristic self motivation and being able to utilize the skills and resources around us and having a goal orientation. And that makes up this whole holistic, not just feeling this hopeful feeling but being very intentional about the actions that would be taken vis a vis a goal. So it's a goal-oriented hope, is what this is and just an example of it is like "When thinking about working I feel confident about myself. When looking for a good job I'm respectful towards who I am. I am worthy of working in a good job." And these are questions that often people have not been asked and they have not thought about much and often when they fill out these questionnaire they say to those who are administering the survey, including myself and they would come back and just share how grateful they are or how much this was meaningful to them just sitting and reflecting on these questions because often they have not been asked these questions when looking for a job. So that's kind of how the hope work has been taking place. Of course when your question was more about how it relates to the barriers. So these questions don't stand alone in a vacuum by themselves. They are always assessed in vis a vis the barriers that they're facing because these feelings are not just feel good feelings but they are also grounded on the realities of day to day operation and what they have to endure everyday and the choices they have to make, of all good choices even. One example is from one particular client that I was talking to was in tears sharing in his group about the choice that he had to make. He is in a job training program when the training itself is not paying him so he needs to stay from 9 o'clock to 3:00 for that training. It's a full-day training for shipping and receiving training and in the afternoon he has to go straight to work. That work will last them until maybe 12 o'clock to get the full time pay and then he sleeps and then he comes to the training in the morning. He has not been spending a lot of time with his family, particularly with his daughter, and one day he was feeling so tired that he called off work. He said he would just sleep for as many hours as he can afford that afternoon after being done with training and he was mentioning that his daughter was walking towards him in her hands was a box of Monopoly game and he knew immediately that's a two hour engagement with my daughter and he just thought "Oh no, I just called off work to sleep and I'm going to spend two hours here and do I sacrifice sleep or what? What do I do?" That immediate that instant or the very long slow motion for him. But ultimately he ended up making that choice to spend a good two hours with his daughter. That costed him the next morning, he fall asleep on the bus on his way to the training and went four stations destination where he had to get off. He was being yelled at by the bus driver and just hauled out of the bus and all that stuff where he was just in tears about this experience. He made the good choice, the right choice and he felt that needed to be made. But he was not treated right and he was also late to coming to training. These things could easily derail him from that whole goal of finishing the training and getting to a job that will be paying him more steadily with benefits and so forth. So in the context of those barriers, the things that would bring him down that would cost him sort of the whole emotional capital to withstand all the storms to be focusing on is training while he's present during the day. He remembered that this hope, reminding himself his own dignity, self-worth, perceived capability, "I am capable of reaching any goals and getting a good job out there. And there's a good meaning behind why I'm doing this to begin with." Futuristic self motivation, "I can tell myself that I can do this." There are some resources and skills that can utilize that he was able to talk to his colleagues in this group setting. He just got up, shared his story to get it off his chest and there was good support in the group to say that we hear you, we're behind you. That's all you needed that day. He just needed to get that off and just keep moving forward. And then he knows at the end of this day he is going to have a good job, goal orientation. So this is a real kind of a movement specific to how they can conquer those barriers as they're trying to reach their goals. You asked about the nuances which is kind of interesting because I have to tell this one story of a participant who was in my focus group called me out and asked me in the middle of the focus group if I was self-sufficient myself. And he pointed at me, said "hey you, are you self-sufficient?" And we may have to pause here for a minute. If the listeners can take a moment and pause and ask themselves or ask yourselves if you're really self-sufficient. And I had

that same moment there when a 30-second silence was recorded, basically the video and the audio that was rolling. And my world was going all over the place I guess it was turned upside down and I, with my training of course research training, I have to say "it's not about me and it's about you, who I want to learn from." That is how I worded it so that's why this is not about me infusing my view of self-sufficiency into this discussion in a focus group setting. The purpose is to learn from you. Therefore please I like to make this about all of you guys. Now he didn't let me pass with that.

[00:15:04] Good for him. that's great.

[00:15:04] And then he did call me out again. "No we're not going there. You have to answer me," and I like to say strictly speaking maybe I may not be. But again this is more about learning from you and that's when I started to shift in my tone that it is not you and me it is more about us and especially right after that he called me out and said "Why are you asking the poor people to be self-sufficient if you're not?" That was the deciding moment I guess or turning moment in the way that I first started the questioning the questionnaire or the process of focus group to then learning that every human being has this forward progress of any kind with whatever the obstacles might be in reaching our own goals in that moment. So whether you are getting out of poverty but the next step is to reach the next goal. So one of the participants rightly mentioned that this self-sufficiency progress, if you were to call it progress, then it never stops until you are done on this earth. So everyone is in this game and we continue to move forward. And this could be one that we all own and have an agency in it to own this process rather than being told that we need to be self-sufficient. So a lot of learning were happening in this process during the research engagement. I would kind of pause there for a minute as the background of how the shift from just the general poverty research to focusing on self-sufficiency particularly that is defined by participants and clients in the programs that they've been assigned by various programs to be in these job readiness or job training programs to be off welfare or they're coming back from prison or homelessness or other kinds of substance abuse situations where they have been assigned to go to these programs and there some type of empowerment based narratives were being formed. And there's a lot of success were being examined and observed by the program administrators. But those narratives were never fully pulled out to capitalize on. They were just those that are left in the private domain. There's a policy context and you live out your life based on the policy context that we're going to take the outcome measures that typically we need to report to funders and everybody is OK after that. So that was kind of where the journey began.

[00:17:17] Interesting. The term that you use is psychological self-sufficiency in your research right?

[00:17:22] Yes.

[00:17:22] Can you talk more? I think that you have, but is that the comment about people thinking about their self-sufficiency in light of how they conquer things?

[00:17:29] Yes. This is kind of denoting psychological empowerment and that making it more of a process based to compliment the outcome of economic self-sufficiency. So psychological is less about just somebody's mindset or their internal motivation alone. But it is largely this process of how one would become empowered over time and throughout the whole life course to reach goals as a piece of any type of outcome or goals that they conquer. So yes it is that process of going from obstacles or barriers to hope. Barriers to hope, barriers to hope, like in a zigzag or kind of an ebb and flow type of movement or dynamic using that process when we reach the outcome of economic self-sufficiency. So that's what it's actually denoting are representing as a whole.

[00:18:18] So can you just talk more about what the real detriments are to following the sort of

policy-based regime? What did that look like practically for clients who are in these work programs who don't have someone who is implementing a more empowered framework with this psychological self-sufficiency framework?

[00:18:35] Yes it is very deliberate. Although not intentioned in the beginning, there was no agenda but it was forming as we're doing a lot of the briefing and learning happened as I was taking the data back into the community and making sure that the feedback loop was there to keep learning and growing and tightening up the concepts. Particularly how psychological self-sufficiency sits in the larger policy context as you're describing right now. And if we go back to the rhetoric of welfare reform how the term psychologically debilitating barriers is the source of welfare dependency that leads to poverty. What's the problem definition that really helped sort of strengthen the argument for welfare reform and do away with welfare dependency, that would mean we could poverty so therefore the sister term self-sufficiency would replace welfare dependency, poverty will be replaced by financial and economic security and stability and so self-sufficiency is a sister term or the other side of the coin term for welfare dependency.

[00:19:38] Now when you go back one step before that where the argument was laid out for psychologically debilitating quote unquote "barriers" that leads to welfare dependency there is this hugely victim blaming argument there. The rhetoric was formed around that. The solution to welfare dependency or the other side of the coin, the positive spin to it was self-sufficiency. But there was a missing block. The psychologically debilitating barrier was never turned into anything that was replaced by go to work. And it was purely a private domain labor market effort where you would find your job and lift yourself up the bootstraps strategy or solution left to the private domain. When in fact the public domain defined the source of the problem there was no public solutions offered to the psychologically debilitating barriers that was originally appointed as a source of the problem. So in that policy context the missing piece would be how does work address psychologically debilitating barriers? There is a gap. So this psychological self-sufficiency is the one that basically replaces that work that is kind of the parallel to these flipping of the concepts or to the other side of the coin. Right? So Welfare dependency to self-sufficiency or economic self-sufficiency for that matter, psychologically debilitating barriers as a source of that would need to be replaced with something psychological. But that was not invested in. And my argument would be if you were to put that into the policy proposal as a solution to address it publicly it would be a much more expensive proposal than the welfare reform as it currently stands. Therefore you're skipping over that logic would then allow one to kind of put it into this vagie labor market kind of solution would make it seem like it's much cheaper from the public side of implementing welfare reform. So this is where it's kind of like ideologically sits in that place where making the rhetoric that was sourcing the welfare reform and making it more accountable to the solution that we don't just point fingers at the debilitating barriers. Let's do something about it if that is the source then we need to do something about it more in concert as a society. Now that's how it becomes more of a policy context in targeting this as not just one where everybody has to lift themselves up their bootstraps and that is more the work solution. This is more let's do it in such a manner that is most human centered whereby people can develop their psychological self-sufficiency and their advocacy the grit resilience and the things that they would need to be able to navigate the system better with a lot of support services around it to then build a work culture that would make it more system based approach. It's kind of how I like to introduce the term.

[00:22:24] There was the welfare reform and it added the work aspect but you're saying there is just a huge missing piece of this other part of the system where it comes in like what to comment on psychological self-sufficiency the term that we're using so often. Not just that you're self-sufficient physically but also psychologically you are so, right? So that that's the missing piece?

[00:22:40] Yes.

[00:22:41] Okay.

[00:22:41] Correct.

[00:22:42] And you know I just really quickly could you also define what kind of barriers we're talking about when we talk about barriers?

[00:22:47] Yes. And these are domains that are not a complete list of all barriers that could exist so these are kind of barriers that emerge from the focus groups and particularly related to employment barriers. And that is maybe more common than others. I wanted to put that as a caveat. We are talking about human capital barriers, mental health and health barriers, and labor market exclusion barriers and soft skills barriers. And these are barriers that are somewhat structural and also individual and that is where our research is currently pointing to. Childcare barriers, I forgot to mention that. So there are five domains as the metric has been developed out of the focus group to measure the degree to which one experiences or perceives these barriers as they are trying to reach the goal of employment and we're calling it perceived employment barrier scale as a measure but also a concept that where it begins with a barrier. Your hope doesn't exist in a vacuum that would be pressing upon your own individual good feeling positive feeling. Just one sided positive psychology would be that approach. This is a social work approach different than positive psychology one where we are appreciating and also noting the importance of life situations that in the most kind a person in environment context and so that's how I call it a social work theory based on barriers being the starting point of how we engage our clients and how we understand the clients through research lens and through that then we would see how hope gets laid on top of it to which then the needle starts moving towards the goals. And this is the championing of kind of the narratives of our clients often showing strength in so many ways to show the most unlikely consequences or results in places where the most unlikely, most unexpected comes out of the strengths of our clients and that is to be celebrated is what we're trying to talk about in this research.

[00:24:44] So I just thinking that with self-sufficiency in that language that the workforce incentive it very often places the emphasis on the work of the individual in relation to their own property. I'm working in public benefit law and sometimes it feels like it's more the system than it is the individual. I'm wondering if psychological self-sufficiency we know would trigger those same feelings in me that it's not just the answer that you're supposed to work and it's not just the answer that you can fix just by yourself. There are a lot of systemic things that go against you if you're in poverty. So I just wonder how you could explain your work to someone who think this, right? That psychological self-sufficiency is something like the attitude that's developed in just self-sufficiency.

[00:25:25] That's a great question and I run into that question a lot especially writing about this to social work journals and other places where I attempt to present at. I get this question all the time. While it may seem like an internal motivation or intrinsic motivation approach that often seems to make it about the human being himself or herself or themselves really to make it that the consequence results as a result of your own effort. And it's not the case. It is more about the system and the structure within one operates. It's kind of a dual; sending the ball this way, and then that way and then you just kind of keep it all back and forth.

[00:26:03] And this approach is one because it's a bottom up approach. It has to start from that individual. And the research language I have to use the term variability in the variable for instance, a variable is a variable because it varies. There is a variability of the scores are high and low. Psychological self-sufficiency as well. It will have a low and a high. So one could make the claim that if you keep pressing on it and if you maximize it then you're going to get to a certain outcome is going to be the argument here. If it's only confined within that individual and then at what point

does it lose explanation is the real question here. Is when psychological self-sufficiency is capped out or maxed out for instance, then it loses variability it's everybody has that psychological self-sufficiency which is what most of our community members have. And also some might lose it, but usually it does come back in some form to invigorate their next effort and that has always been the story that we are trying to tell with the kind of a positive celebration of that effort. Of course not to say that that is the way to cure or make things better or one ultimately and this is the only solution. Now capping it out or maxing it out is the kind of the way to approach then there is only so much you can up to in terms of the outcome when this is the input and if you have the output of some kind. It could be economic self-sufficiency, it could be other things. Then what is left to continue to get the needle moving is left to the structure, is really how I would argue so that there is no more to blame on the individual because if psychological self-sufficiency is one where everyone can give their best effort to do because it's already part of their DNA it's part of their lives and no one to teach anybody how to do this, this is what human beings do. But if we're doing our best with this and reaching a certain level of outcome and if that outcome is not enough the ball's on the other court and it cannot be tossed back to the individual's side, which then leaves the structure the system or any of those left that has always been playing the game of tossing the ball that can no longer do that. It really needs to push against that system to now then be forced to then say this is the only solution left now that we are now reaching this point. I'm not saying that we need to wait that long. It's not that. That is the bottom up spirit of this in the way that we're using community organizing sort of principles to kind of create this empowerment culture at the individual level, at the organizational level from more on the side of the nonprofit organizational level. This has the potential to push into the workplace culture of any companies that would hire out of the communities that we're talking about. And often those employers will talk about how the biggest problem is their absenteeism and tardiness and the attitudes and the behaviors of newly hired individuals coming from the communities and if supervisors aren't doing their best to keep them engaged in the job yet they lose them within a month or at best before the probationary period is over 90 days Mark. So if that is the problem often the ball gets tossed back to that individual not performing well on the job and they're less than responsible. If that is always the narrative coming back from the H.R. world, we don't have a lot of power as social workers and other than to hire a job developer who will build a good relationship with these employers who will sit in their chair leaning themselves back in their chair and picking from the best of the candidates that we offer them. And it's a losing game if you keep playing it that way. It's an employers game and how do you bring the power differential back to where it can be balanced is when you can offer the benefit of the employers also and being invested in that human centeredness on the job and creating a workplace culture where that could also turn into productivity for themselves. They kind of know it but they want somebody else to do that first so that they don't have to be the guinea pig before they try it out. So now that world is moving more quickly than the social work field is, particularly in workforce development and we play often the dressup game cleaning up their resumes and have them look good and practicing looking somebody in the eyes straight and looking confident at job interviews. Those are things more at the behavioral level. Doesn't go to the core level of where that can be sustained. And that one can believe that sustaining it is important so that the culture change shift happens to fit the needs of the people. That kind of movement is not there. This one represents that in a larger scheme of things that has the language of psychological but it is a bottom up system change effort to nudge the system to react to this bottom up force that is trying to create this balance of power. I'm using the example of the employers to the employees in this case but it could be in other forms of dynamics of any kind of system to the individual.

[00:31:12] So an example of a way to help the client at a level of real psychological change as well as workforce change is to have something like the group that you had is an example of how we meet this need?

[00:31:24] Right. So out of this work I'll have to tell you from the organizations who are involved in

using the survey instrument of psychological self-sufficiency using the two metrics, employment help scale and the perceived employment barriers scale, using both measures to look at the dynamic of technological self-sufficiency as it relates to their outcomes. The research has been kind of patented in the communities to help them look at this data together with us to see how their investment and those relational aspect of their staff being empowered to provide the relational support and the most genuine way to their clients really generates the psychological self-sufficiency thereby translating that into those outcomes that they can report to the funders. So really honing in on the black box of the dynamics we are now in in the space of discussion talking about relational social work. That's really at the heart of what we do, often not celebrated or not talked about until more recently; we're becoming more deliberate about talking about that. And that psychological self-sufficiency is a process that represents that this can be cultivated through those relational capital that you might have through this context. And you mentioned about the groups. So I should say that work of this research, many agencies particularly a good friend of mine who studied in the Ph.D. program at Washington University in St. Louis with me, Jedson Bliss, was at the time serving as a chief program officer at an agency in St. Louis. And he looked at the survey and recommended that I have a sketched out version of a program that might be designed to improve psychological self-sufficiency which often isn't there. Is it left to the individual to do this on their own or can there be a scaffolding of some kind of a system or program that could help one do this? Essentially he was asking for some type of a curriculum or program design that could help one stay on the course of maintaining sustaining and improving their method of increasing psychological self-sufficiency basically. If this metric were really doing something but there is no input to invigorate this, is basically his point. So in 2014 I was given that challenge and mapped out sort of modules that would help one to be more reflective of who they are as a strong or the able capable individual that has been in the throes of many different kinds of challenges and many storms in life yet standing strong and how that person can celebrate that to keep moving that needle to where they need to reach for that next goal. So that was named at the time Transforming Impossible for the barriers into Possible for the hope. So TIP, Transforming Impossible into Possible program was what it was called and it was launched in 2014. To have that in this drawing stage and also being introduced in the community has one that could be a complimentary program that would help boost their currently existing curriculum in the communities and whatever that they're doing with adult education or could be a fatherhood program, could be other types of charity job readiness training curriculum that they might have like resume development of things that interview skills. This would be one that could be filling that space of social emotional skills development or strengthening, I should say strengthening, of those skills to help sustain those skills that they're learning on the ground is how it was introduced and it's kind of going in different forms with a life that has a significant contribution in the community currently.

[00:34:54] Yeah that sounds great. I just imagine you're required to work to receive certain benefits and I don't mean to pile on requirements on to people who are receiving not that much money very often, you know? I just think that if we're focusing on getting you back into work you're suggesting we should focus also on your psychological well-being and to focus on one versus the other is a mistake and probably not tenable for someone to actually make some significant changes. And so I just think implementing something like this but maybe not taking up all of someone's time would be really important. So they're fully focusing on how to get back into work but also how do I be psychologically well enough to be in work. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about where does this all stand in the scheme of the Grand Challenges?

[00:35:39] Currently I have connected with one of the Grand Challenges more deeply than the other 11: Building financial capability for all. That's led by one of my former professors Michael Shredde and Margaret Shredde and others, Julie Berkenmeyer and others at St. Louis University. So I kind of connect it with that group and I connected with one of the sort of the practice groups of that particular grand challenge to see how this approach might fit with the way in

which we can empower individuals who are seeking to be financially and asset strong. And that's where I think because of the work that I've done with the Center for Social Development in Washington University in the past I felt that that was the closest one that I could put myself into. And also the practice and we have different work groups. One is policy research and practice and I purposely signed up for the practice group to be part of this kind of a bottom up element of how we can be practiced informed. Sometimes, you know, the Grand Challenges can be seen as kind of an initiative as pushing the research informed practice and research is the academy and that is where the golden wisdom exists where all we have gathered the wealth of knowledge in the field. Yet the knowledge came from the field where the practice is alive and well and there's a lot more innovation still sort of being incubated in the field of social work. And I just wanted to put that out there and it can be misconstrued as that. It's not that, but it's definitely the beginning of the initiative. But if we can build this loop from practice back to the larger academy that represents our scholarly work I think that's when Grand Challenges can be much stronger and could be relevant to all social workers in the most meaningful way and so I kind of connected with that particular grand challenge yet I have not written much about that but I am finding room in that space to see how this could contribute to that particular grand challenge. I can see the relevance to all other Grand Challenges where especially that practice element. If this were to be found successful and contributing to that particular grand challenge I could then reach out to others who are focusing on the practice element of each grand challenge and see whether there is a room for bringing in practitioners, the leaders in the practice world to be the cocreator of knowledge and contribute to the data collection and the validation of some of those models and the more scholarly way but also that the knowledge itself. We have a wealth of knowledge in social work, more so in the practice world than what has been uncovered in the research world. So I'd like to keep us alive and well and the most healthy way using this PSS framework as a bridge to bring the practice informed research to invigorate that channel of building knowledge so that research informed practice can be further strengthened. It's kind of how I see this work being relevant and connecting to the current Grand Challenges.

[00:38:44] And can you also tell us a little bit about the funding streams that have supported this work?

[00:38:49] Yes it was that Centre for Social Justice Education and Research at St. Louis University. That was the first funding ever to go out in the field and learn from people and really set the tone for this research as people in the community our clients are participants in these programs are ones who hold the wisdom and the truth and the theories that are most relevant and applicable in their lives and that's how tone was set for this research. So that was the very beginning. Since that time I brought the work to Chicago in 2006 and working with various community based organizations on the South Side and West Side of Chicago have led me to continue to build a database of this psychological self-sufficiency measure server data, and locally we have found the Lloyd A Fry Foundation being very supportive of the work itself through the research lens but also how it translated into an implementation study of delivering the most genuine version of TIP, Transforming Impossible into Possible. So they've been funding that initiative. And also I should also have to mention the U.S. Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. Office of Program Research and Evaluation, OPRE, has launched our university, Health Profession Opportunity Grant University Partnership, kind of a portfolio of university researchers working with the grantees of the Health Profession Opportunity Grants. So that worked in partnership with our program partners. They have allowed us to gather data of those who are in this career pathway model of community colleges providing education and credentialing effort of individuals coming into study and providing tuition benefits and other kinds of support services. And from there connecting with a sector based approach and career pathways, in particular this model represents the healthcare sector and often these jobs are the Certified Nursing Assistants, CNAs, and medical assistance and those also would go into a long term registered nurse track

would be a longer term investment on their education. But following these individuals over time on the metrics of PSS has been funded by the federal government for two rounds of or year funding from 2010 and now we're in the second funding stream of that work. Working with our partners in the community. Mostly this is targeting TANF participants as the place to recruit for health profession opportunities. So it's working in those same neighborhoods that I've been doing work with other agencies.

[00:41:23] Seems like you have a lot of support behind you that's awesome. In preparing for this interview I actually have learned that the intervention model you're talking about, TIP or Transforming Impossible into Possible, has been recognized by the University of Chicago, Chicago's Urban Innovation Challenge in 2015 and the Chicago Innovation Award this year. So I'm just wondering what makes your work innovative particularly as a social work idea allowing it to stand shoulder to shoulder with other technological and scientific ideas and products?

[00:41:53] That's a really good question because I'm also wondering why currently, why suddenly social work ideas are being tapped into. And are we being given enough credit for those ideas and in social work these ideas might be common sense and often historically we've been regarded as touchy feely for too long and suddenly the tide is changing and now the same touchy feely is being called innovative. So we all have to wonder as a social work community at large. I think what is going on in this larger world of innovation and why suddenly our ideas are being put forth as being innovative. At the same time are social workers being invited to present on those ideas or are these ideas are being taken by the larger innovation world for exploitation or whatnot? So that name can be changed to something else that is a social work idea and could be turned into something else. And then other people call it innovation as if that came from not necessarily such work but somewhere that they were able to uncover from a different source. So I think it's a time to be very careful about what we say or when watching this whole innovation movement in the fourth industrial revolution stage that we're in. Often it's the kind of rush to make automation happen. And the AI movement, technology, making everything information, large data sets, big data sets, making predictions, human behaviors and predictions of behaviors possible and how's that all connecting us to be better humans and one that has agency in this world has to be the question. I think we maybe would be asking is social work in the driver's seat when this fourth industrial revolution is fully in action or are we going to be following it and maybe doing the cleanup work after the mess isn't being made by another rush of things that we do as human civilization? So I think that's a better question that I'm asking myself and to go back to your question what makes this particular TIP program innovative, I'm asking myself that question in light of this big question that I was just posing to myself and to the social work audience out there. So now what are we talking about when we're talking about TIP? It's just focus on human centeredness and it's the start from that individual inside out the ripple effects then leading to the next system to be nudged and that system to react and to focus on humanness or the human centeredness to create a culture around it. So it's a bottom-up system change model as I explained to you earlier. It doesn't kind of hit home to many people in the beginning but that allows organizations to adapt and to not use human centeredness as an ornament to what they want to achieve. What this is kind of calling out to the common practice of organizational strategies and management and development is that you don't use this as an ornament to what you want to do, for instance profiteering. You need to make it the centered piece. 80 percent of what you do is about this and then add other things to it, then you will be much better off in this new world that's emerging in the fourth industrial revolution is what really the message is being taught. Now that's where social work is at the heart of it. And I am very careful to not sell out social work. And also our participants' narratives particularly the gentleman who was calling me out asking if I was self-sufficient myself. And I have to live true to that question whether I am also part of the system exploiting these data to be innovative or bringing innovation around the people's needs, the people's realities, people's strengths, people's real humanness. So as I was explaining to you it's a power balance. Often we have been seen as a profession that serves the larger capitalist

need of how things need to be fluid. There shouldn't be a revolution taking place keeping things quiet. Is that the role or is it that a new revolution or a revolutionary idea or innovative idea might be that's what social work has always been. That is to bring everything around that individual family and communities and organizations. And then the whole system that's always been advocating as a whole, not individually or just following another system by itself but we've been always looking at it as a whole. That's what I think maybe may have been innovation all along where the other fields other technologies other products have not been focused on they've been so far removed that they suddenly see social work ideas as being innovative. So that's how I see it. And I do want to make sure that we're well protected in this whole hoopla about what is innovation and in these awards. I'm really happy that someone is seeing this to be valuable but I will be protecting to my life and especially for the integrity and the dignity of our participants who have built this narrative of psychological self-sufficiency and TIP. Every drop of me will be put in place to protect that to not be exploited for something that will be used as an ornament.

[00:47:00] I Think that's a good stance to take. We're closing up on the interview. I just wanted to ask you what is the future direction of this line of research?

[00:47:09] I'm reflecting on that very carefully as well. Because we've done a good job of publishing a series of articles with this line of work starting from the focus group studies to then have these metric or measurement validation studies of employment hope and perceived barriers and combining the two into a metric that warms the psychological self-sufficiency building model. And then we have longitudinal data through the federal funding to look at how that progress leads to those outcomes of employment and retention. And then we have an intervention now that we can test to see how that could complement other existing interventions or models and also as kind of looking at the condition of not receiving any programs or interventions how this might fare in comparison. So there have been a series of work and mostly within the area of workforce development as where this has been focused on. So for future research I think the invitation is coming slowly from health promotion and health literacy feel, financial capability and financial literacy field and also ex-offender or returning citizen work and how they're transitioning back into our society and our communities and veterans. Veterans Affairs and wellbeing, and youth development of course, and academic performance and violence prevention among youth. There are some good well-spirited and well minded partners who want to test out whether this theory holds true in contexts that are not specific to just workforce development and other types of just strengthening the humanness or I would like to call it humanship. It's a term that is not going to appear in a dictionary but it is one that is I think translated from French that is being used in marketing to denote that one is a leader in your own life. So it's kind of a term for leadership but it is humanship that leads to leadership in a group setting. So I like to kind of couch this as a term that makes social work stand out at the center of all disciplines, academic disciplines but also other professions as one that is promoting humanship in various contexts. And it doesn't have to be PSS necessarily as the only metric that represents humanship. There could be others in concert that makes a human a strong agent or have that agency in place for being that leader to create this ripple effect for system change as one that could lead a community organizing effort or even a large scale policy change in whatever form. I think this could have a lot of bearing in those areas as just the concept itself but in application in ways that we can look at different ways to measure it and track it and see if we can work together to bring social work to the core of all professions and academic disciplines.

[00:49:56] Those are great goals. I you want to see and hear follow up about how you reached those goals and where research goes from here related to what you're talking about. I think those are all areas that would benefit from your research coming to them. Thank you so much for joining us. Is there anything else you want to add before we end?

[00:50:11] No, this has been a truly good reflective kind of interview. Thank you very much for engaging me in these thought provoking questions and being able to share my thoughts and experiences with the social work community at large and I'm always going to stand as a cheerleader for all the great work that's being done out there by all the leaders with names that can be shown or not shown. But people who are just really doing great work out there. Just kudos and my hat's off to everybody. Thank you.

[00:50:36] Thank you Philip.

[00:50:37] You've been listening to Dr. Philip Hong discuss social support, employment hope and economic self-sufficiency among low-income job seekers on inSocialWork.

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