Background:

My primary research agenda focuses on the effects and elements of Psychological Self-Sufficiency (PSS) –, which consists of Employment Hope (EH) and Perceived Employment Barriers (PEB) among workforce development program participants – health care career program called Health Professions Opportunity Grant (HPOG). The majority of these participants are Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) recipients, Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) customers, and public housing residents. Specifically, I have investigated the process of how low-income job seekers become ready to become gainfully employed in conjunction with developing their own PSS.

As I have been working for five years as a research assistant in the interdisciplinary research group, Center for Research on Self-Sufficiency (CROSS) within the school of Social Work at Loyola University Chicago, I have been active in disseminating our work via publications and book chapters, and also presenting it to social work conferences, and local community agencies.

CROSS is the only research center that focuses on Psychological Self-Sufficiency (PSS), and developed a Transforming Impossible to Possible (TIP) program based on PSS framework. CROSS works as a research team and studies PSS, using diverse perspectives, such as advanced statistical, neuroscience, clinical, and organizational methods. This research center received federal grants twice from the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Based the experiences in publishing papers and conducting diverse research methods from CROSS, I feel confident in developing and conducting my own research in the future.

I have published two peer-reviewed articles and one book chapter while I have been working in CROSS. One of the articles was published in Social Work Research, one of the most prestigious and popular journals in the field of social work. One of my biggest successes and challenges as a doctoral candidate was being asked to help write a chapter in a King & Hong’s book. The book is about evaluating health-related workforce development programs. I helped to write one chapter describing the effects of psychological self-sufficiency on participants based on the quantitative results that our research team found in local community agencies. I also submitted three articles in peer-reviewed journals addressing the effects of PSS among economically marginalized populations.

Current gap in the empirical literature:

A concept of Self-Sufficiency (SS) has been developed to evaluate workforce development programs. A decade ago, most social science researches recognized SS as an economic concept. On the other hand, Gowdy and Pealrmuter (1994), Hawkins (2005), and Hong, Sheriff, & Naeger (2009) started looking at the importance of internal motivation, (one aspect of PSS), in workforce development programs and among low-income populations. These researchers tried to measure the effectiveness of workforce development programs not only economically, but also psychologically.

A number of researchers focused on decreasing the employment barriers that workforce development program participants face for their success outcomes. (Danziger, Kalil & Anderson, 2000; Holzer, Stoll, & Wissoker, 2004; Hong, Polanin,
Key, & Choi, 2014; Nam, 2005; Olson & Pavetti, 1996). Health status, family-related, human capital, education, and work-related barriers are the list of employment barriers that previous researchers found.

Putting psychological and employment barrier concepts together in evaluating workforce development programs, Hong, Choi, & Key (2018) developed a new concept of Psychological Self-Sufficiency (PSS) through the use of focus groups with program participants. This new concept of PSS points out the importance of psychological factors in evaluating workforce development programs by anchoring the internal motivation to employment barriers. In the PSS framework, which is supported by the social cognitive career theory (SCCT) and the mental contrasting with implementation intentions (MCII) theories, employment barriers happen first, and then low-income job seekers try to overcome these barriers along with developing their employment hope for their success.

The most valuable characteristic of PSS is that it is not a thing that people can achieve at one time. It is a process. Yet, little research has been focused on the process of PSS. The gap in the literature that my dissertation addresses is looking at the process and the elements of PSS using data from workforce development program participants.

**Methodologies Employed:**

As such, there are four lines of research that I am currently pursuing in my dissertation. First, I am interested in examining the effects of PSS, controlling for other possible factors that may affect the job training program outcome for participants (Propensity Score Matching). My second line of research critically examines the pattern of changing the PSS status over the workforce development programs (Linear Growth Model). Third, I am intrigued by the question of whether there is a specific group that we have to focus on more (Latent Profile Analysis). Lastly, I want to examine whether researchers are correctly measuring the PSS concept - EH and PEB (Item Response Theory). The primary goal of my dissertation may point out the importance of increasing internal motivation and decreasing employment barriers for workforce development program participants. Findings from this study can contribute toward improving social work practices with new knowledge of PSS.

**Future Research:**

Beyond PSS, there are diverse factors that affect workforce development program participants. One important factor that I will focus on in my future research is the social support that participants attain from diverse populations (e.g. social workers, friends, or family members). Slightly in a different direction, I would like to advance my research on employment barriers faced by the workforce development program participants. Among diverse employment barriers that participants face, health and education issues are the most challenging factors that hinder them from achieving success. I plan on conducting a poverty research project that could reveal the dynamics of employment barriers that bring closer attention to the explanations of poverty.

Ultimately, I would like to utilize my future research opportunities to explore poverty and inequality issues, including the effectiveness of workforce development programs, economic self-sufficiency, social support, and employment barriers. I believe that my master’s degree in Applied Statistics will help in analyzing these research topics that I listed above.