

# Transforming Opportunities into Productivity (TOP): A New Social Development Model for Social Transformation

Philip Young P. Hong

*Transforming Opportunities into Productivity (TOP) is a human-social development approach for human-centered business hiring and employee engagement practice—mainly targeting, but not limited to, for-profit, non-profit, and public organizations that employ low-income, low-skilled workers. Applying the New Social Development paradigm (Mohan, 2022) in the context of developing an inclusive labor market system, TOP advances the core psychological self-sufficiency (PSS-I) theory that guides the implementation of the Transforming Impossible into Possible (TIP) program at the individual level—the supply side of the labor market. Psycho-social sufficiency (PSS-O) theory provides the foundation for TOP in application to the demand-side organizational development tool designed to interlock with TIP to create an inclusive workplace culture of worker engagement, inclusion, connection, development, and growth. TOP has the potential to play an instrumental role in creating system change by keeping TIP as the organizing principle for social innovation and social transformation in the 4th industrial revolution.*

**Keywords:** *Transforming Opportunities into Productivity, Transforming Impossible into Possible, psycho-social sufficiency, psychological self-sufficiency, social transformation, human-social development*

## Introduction

This paper presents an overview of literature and evidence highlighting the need for a human-centered, demand-side labor market intervention in the continuum of human-social development (HSD) progress toward social transformation in a changing world (Mohan, 1999, 2010, 2022). Social development eradicates

Philip Young P. Hong is a Dean and Professor, University of Georgia School of Social Work, 279 Williams Street | Athens, GA 30602. He can be contacted at [pyphong@uga.edu](mailto:pyphong@uga.edu).

“the sources of inequality and unfreedom toward achieving a civil society based on freedom and justice” (Mohan, 2020, p. 48). However, social development approaches have traditionally been applied top-down, with their constructs and measures of success being tied to economic growth at the cost of maintaining structures of social exclusion and with the consequence of cultural, ideological, and institutional moral dissonance (Mohan, 2007). This poverty of culture (PoC), as Mohan (2011) would put it, leaves unchecked the dehumanizing effects of economic systems by delinking politics and ideology from human behavior and well-being.

Comprehensively bringing together the “symbiotic hybridity of human and social development processes” requires a bottom-up social transformation of civil society aimed at achieving global democracy (Mohan, 2007, p. 80). Although with the best intentions, top-down, economically focused social development approaches without the bottom-up foundation of activated civil society have missed the opportunity to connect participatory, human development “processes” to the “outcomes” of advancing human freedom and justice. Without the intentional, purposeful, and systematic connections of HSD processes, PoC will persist to where the burden of human-system mismatch will continue to fall on the human agency when the politico-ideological system remains powerless vis-à-vis the economic system (Hong, 2013; Mohan, 2020). Supply-demand mismatch in the labor market is an example where the burden of meeting the employers’ demand for quality falls on the jobseekers and workers—the supply side—and not the other way around to meet human and professional needs.

To address this PoC dilemma, the New Social Development (NSD) paradigm that Mohan (2010) proposed could guide “a postmaterial process of human-societal transformation that seeks to build identities of people, communities and nations” (p. 205). NSD offers a framework for developing innovative, nontraditional, and bottom-up identity-building processes to achieve a civil society based on freedom and justice (Mohan, 2020, 2022). Applying HSD as the key conceptual component of the NSD paradigm, this paper introduces Transforming Opportunities into Productivity (TOP) as an approach for human-centered business hiring and employee engagement practice—mainly targeting, but not limited to, for-profit, non-profit, and public organizations that employ low-income, low-skilled workers.

### **PoC Dilemma: Structurally Dependent Politics and Ideology**

The PoC dilemma for social development in the United States can be explained by the structural dependence of poverty thesis (Hong, 2008, 2013). Poverty is not accepted as a problem issue to be set as a policy priority due to the split public views on the causes of poverty—structural conditions versus individual attributes and behaviors. In the context of market dominance in the United States—if anything were to be done about poverty—the structurally dependent nature of poverty keeps it to the default settings in the market system to approach it minimally

as an individual issue. The thesis posits that structural poverty is marginalized in policymaking in the United States because of a “structurally dependent political system, ideology, business power in public policy, and truncated labor market policy” (Hong, 2021, p. 62).

Capitalism-liberalism as the dominant ideology in the United States is so encompassing and foundational that it is pervasively part of everyday politics (Dolbeare & Dolbeare, 1973, p. 1). This maintains the capitalist economic system as central and keeps politics secondary (p. 56). As such, PoC becomes evident in liberalism and capitalism, both sharing the fundamental value of individualism, with the former emphasizing “primacy for the individual and strict limitation upon governments to ensure full freedom for the individual to serve his needs as he saw fit” (p. 55). This full freedom refers to the natural right of individuals to secure and protect their property, and liberalism evolved with capitalism to apply its market principles to organizational and government operations. Hong (2008) cites Dolbeare and Dolbeare (1973) to describe this process:

Liberalism’s worldview not only assumes that the political system’s task is to support and promote the operating capitalist economic system, but it views the political process itself through capitalist economic concepts. Politics is seen as a free market for the exchange of demands, support, and public policies ... In realistic and modern language, this is democracy. (pp. 57–58)

The structural dependence (Przeworski & Wallerstein, 1988) of the government on the market inform how business interests are given advantages from their privileged positions (Block, 1977; Lindblom, 1977; Miliband, 1969). Ideological and institutional dissonance that characterizes PoC is manifested in economic hegemony being maintained at the sacrifice of liberty and popular sovereignty. Hong (2008) cites Bowles and Gintis (1986), who suggested that “democratic institutions have been mere ornaments in the capitalist economy” (p. 28). In this sense, Lindblom (1982) viewed market dominance as being a “prison” limiting political change and discouraging efforts to improve political institutions (p. 329). A healthy economy is treated as a non-negotiable fixed condition for policy to be designed around, and it is never considered a changeable variable to alter to achieve democratic outcomes (Lindblom, 1982, p. 333). The market can signal less than optimal performance against institutional changes that do not favor or directly benefit the market. Market-based structural environment incentivizes politicians to favor business interests over public interests (Lindblom & Woodhouse, 1993; Smith, 1999).

A strong economy often overshadows this structural dependence while the public is forced to endure the consequential effects of “The Great Risk Shift” (Hacker, 2019). Structurally dependent political institutions reached the point where it became inevitable to end the social contract as we have known to provide public welfare and a safety net against social risks and market failure. There has been a renewed emphasis on “personal responsibility,” not so much as an effort

to increase choice but more to transfer risk away from government or business actors to individuals with far fewer resources to deal with unforeseen social and economic risks. Structurally dependent decisions made by policymakers have exacerbated these risks by enabling risk transfer to individuals rather than protecting them from them. Stable employment has declined, and part-time and temporary work has increased at the convenience of employers, not the workers. The risk shift marked the rise of the precariat—those working in precarious jobs in the secondary labor market—and the erosion of the American Dream (mobilization of workforce motivation into the opportunity structure) due to polarization of the haves and the have-nots and further social exclusion of the long-term unemployed.

### **Problem Definition of Welfare Dependency**

More than two decades ago in the United States, it was criticized that most social science research on social welfare tended to be one cycle behind the welfare reform debates and had little impact on policy outcomes (Danziger, 1999, p. 25). It was noted that once the policies were implemented, they influenced the nature of subsequent welfare reform research (p. 26). Danziger (1999) argued, “Social scientists have conducted hundreds of empirical studies related to various aspects of welfare policies in the 35 years since the War on Poverty was declared.” Still, the policy implications have virtually been ignored in political debates (p. 2). For instance, an implicit assumption made by the politicians when passing the welfare reform legislation—the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA; P.L. 104–193)—was that almost everyone willing to search for a job would get hired and will be able to attain self-sufficiency before the time limit on cash assistance becomes effective.

PoC in welfare-to-work politics illuminated the nature of structurally dependent decision-making by policymakers—transferring risks to individuals without altering the opportunity structure in the labor market. This policy decision ignored findings from studies that documented how employer demand for less-skilled workers had declined over the previous quarter century (Danziger, 1999, p. 2). Also, many research studies have found that welfare recipients were more disadvantaged than their non-welfare-receiving peers in terms of health, mental health, and other capacities and, therefore, less able to work (Danziger, 1999, p. 27). Despite the warnings by experts, as expected in a structurally dependent system, politicians have outweighed the value of efficiency over equity and pushed for the reform.

Fraser and Gordon (1994) cited Nathan (1986) to suggest that the problem issue of poverty received more attention in the political arena when its focus transferred to welfare dependency, with policy experts from both parties agreeing that “dependency is bad for people, that it undermines their motivation to support themselves, and isolates and stigmatizes welfare recipients in a way that over a long period feeds into and accentuates the underclass mindset and condition” (p. 248).

Despite the emphasis on evidence-informed policy-making and practice on poverty alleviation, researchers had to watch the problem issue of welfare dependency to emerge as the focal point of discussion and be argued out in the political arena rather than to empirically test competing problem definitions to inform policy development (Hong & Crawley, 2015).

Problem definition is a “process of characterizing problems in the political arena” (Rochefort & Cobb, 1994, pp. 3–4). Baumgartner and Jones (1993) contend that “arguments must be made and accepted that a given problem can be solved by government action before a social condition becomes a public policy problem” (p. 26). For a problem to attract the attention of government officials, they argue, “there must be an image, or an understanding, that links the problem with a possible government solution” (p. 26). In many instances, the politics of problem definition has involved making political decisions that exclude those without power (Bachrach & Baratz, 1963), leading to the consequence of keeping alternative problem definitions that represent the interest of low-income workers at the margins.

As depicted in Figure 1, the welfare reform policy development rested on the following problem definition:

... long-term welfare recipients have psychological barriers that put them in weak positions vis-à-vis the labor market. Unable to secure stable employment, they end up settling for welfare checks and government subsidies and continue to abuse the system by staying in the state of welfare dependency. (Hong & Crawley, 2015, p. 130)

The causal link to the issue of welfare dependency is psychological barriers. Weir (1992) maintained that policy is less a direct product of the preferences of politicians and voters than “what is possible” or “what government is able to do” (p. 163) as critical to determining how problems are defined. The possible solutions rather than what is most desirable tend to drive the shaping of public decisions. The structurally dependent political system could only offer labor market-based approaches as feasible solutions. Figure 1 presents economic self-sufficiency as

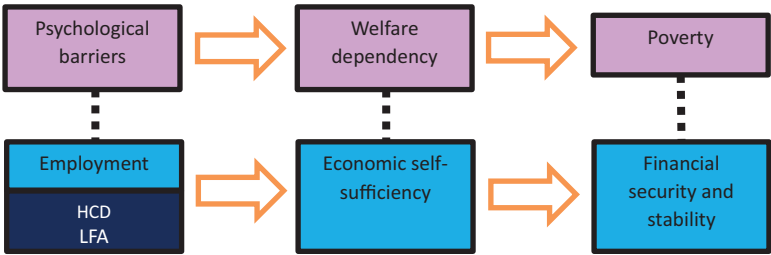


Figure 1 Structurally dependent problem definition of welfare dependency. HCD: human capital development; LFA: labor force attachment.

the positive parallel problem issue to welfare dependency with a causal link to employment as the solution to address psychological barriers.

However, there is a logical disconnect between psychological barriers and employment. Employment may indirectly help overcome psychological barriers for welfare leavers by becoming an active and productive economic agent. The blanketing approach, however, is far removed from its causal connection that the political debate supported as the source of welfare dependency. Employment-based policy development to move individuals from welfare to work involved human capital development (HCD) and labor force attachment (LEA) strategies that did not intentionally connect resources to overcome psychological barriers to what employers see as a desirable “psychologically strong” worker. Outsourcing to the labor market for solutions to address “psychological barriers” as the source of welfare dependency left the market to operate with no incentive to create a competitive labor market entry system for welfare leavers. Hong (2008) cites Seccombe (2007) to suggest that “welfare is a problem of the low-wage labor market’s inability to provide adequate income for low-income families, rather than of the demoralizing system itself” (p. 29).

### **The Fallacy of Labor Market Dependency**

Market-centered dominant narratives limit the HSD perspectives, decisions, and collective efforts, making them path dependent on earlier choices and definitions. According to Rochefort and Cobb (1994), problem ownership involves “domination of the way that a social concern is thought of and acted upon in the public arena, that is, by serving as the recognized authority on essential questions of causes, consequences, and solutions” (p. 14). While welfare dependency was effectively demonized to gain public support to undo its adverse effects on poverty, labor market dependency—relying on the demand side of the labor market—was not questioned or challenged as something negative (Hong & Crawley, 2015). It is then appropriate to ask, “If economics is so central to American social development, why has the range of policies that sought to promote employment or modify the operation of the labor market been so truncated in America?” (Hong, 2013, p. 73).

One of the many problems in emphasizing work as a substitute for welfare was the labor mismatch between the growing areas of the economy at the time—business services, media, computer, and data services, the securities industry, etc.—and the welfare recipients who would be pushed into the job market with low skills and education (Finder, 1996). Specifically, Iceland (1997) suggested that the increasing demand for high technology has limited the job openings for those newly entering the labor force with limited skills—skills mismatch. Another realm of concern was the industries moving outward into the suburban areas, while a large number of labor supply has been created in the city area—spatial mismatch (Iceland, 1997). Third, below-skilled workers were known to participate in a separate and distinct underpaid labor market, a secondary labor market, and may never advance to the primary level—dual or split labor market (Schiller, 2001, p. 82).

## Theories of Discrimination

Blau, Ferber, and Winkler (1998) outline two major streams of discrimination—societal (prelabor market) and labor market—considering the effects of differences in earnings. They define societal discrimination as the multitude of social influences that cause a certain group to be adversely affected in the labor market (p. 142). In America, racial discrimination has resulted in a pattern of segregated and inferior schools for blacks and other minorities (Schiller, 2001). This is derived from the sense of isolation and subjugation imposed by society, causing low educational attainment for minority children. Poor children are maintained in schools segregated largely by socioeconomic class and provided with substandard facilities (Schiller, 2001). The educational system also discriminates against women (Blau et al., 1998). Because educational attainments are a prime determinant of the distribution of poverty, those discriminated against in schools are most likely to be among low-income individuals.

The second type of discrimination in the labor market exists when two equally qualified individuals are treated differently solely based on their gender, race, age, disability, etc. (Blau et al., 1998, p. 186). This may be seen partly as a result of societal discrimination because minority racial groups, women, and low-income people start at the bottom of the labor market due to a lack of education (Schiller, 2001). As Jennings (1994) put it, labor market discrimination would mean that (1) the skills necessary for economic mobility are inaccessible to some people; (2) job promotions are unequally distributed based on race, gender, and ethnicity; and (3) information about economic opportunities is not distributed uniformly or consistently (p. 97). Members of minority or poor populations work less often, for fewer hours, at less attractive jobs, and for less income (Schiller, 2001). Discrimination in the labor market takes many forms, as discussed in the following.

The competitive theory of discrimination considers discrimination “a restrictive practice that interrupts free trade between two independent societies: white and black, male and female, etc.” (Thurow, 1975, p. 156). When there is discrimination, the discriminators maximize a utility function that depends upon income and physical distance from those discriminated against (Thurow, 1975, p. 157). Specifically, “the greater the physical distance between the discriminators and the discriminated, the higher the utility of discriminators, so discriminators are willing to pay a premium not to associate with the discriminated” (Thurow, 1975, p. 157). The monopoly theory of discrimination expands on the physical-distance model of the competitive theory by putting the context into a single society, and not two separate ones, where the trade takes place—that is, women and men (Thurow, 1975, p. 164). As the monopolist group, the dominant group controls much more than the willingness to trade or not to trade with the minority group. The minority group may have few options and certainly not the option of refusing to trade.

Referring to the job competition model, statistical discrimination allows rational cost-minimizing employers to hire workers with the most preferred

background characteristics (Thurow, 1975, p. 171; Blau et al., 1998, p. 207). For example, an employer's differential treatment of men and women based on their perceptions of average gender differences in productivity or job stability has been termed this type of discrimination (Blau et al., 1998, p. 176). Suppose a prospective employee's background characteristics are above some level. In that case, they are eligible to be hired regardless of their willingness to work at a lower wage than the more preferred groups. An individual who belongs to a group with a lower probability of having a desired characteristic, or a higher likelihood of having an undesired characteristic, is not paid less but is completely excluded from the job in question (Thurow, 1975, p. 174). In a job competition world, it is considered economically rational for an unprejudiced employer to practice statistical discrimination. Employers' profits are expected to increase if they hire workers from groups with higher average probabilities of having the desired background characteristics.

### **Segmented Labor Market Theory**

The inception of the segmented labor market theory can be traced back to Dunlop and Kerr in the 1950s (cited in Cain, 1976), who first gave prominence to the concepts of internal and external labor markets. They viewed the growth of large firms and unions as promoting internal (within-firm) labor markets that were only weakly connected to the external (between-firm) labor markets. Doeringer and Piore (1971), who are most associated with the segmented labor market theory, define the internal labor market as an administrative unit "within which the pricing and allocation of labor are governed by a set of administrative rules and procedures" (p. 1). They assert that the internal labor market is to be distinguished from the external labor market of conventional economic theory, where "pricing, allocating, and training decisions are controlled directly by economic variables" (Doeringer & Piore, 1971, p. 2). These two labor markets are interconnected, but movement "occurs at certain job classifications which constitute ports of entry and exit" to and from the internal labor market (Doeringer & Piore, 1971, p. 2). Jobs in the internal labor market are filled by mobility—promotion, and transfer—of workers who have already gained entry. Accordingly, these jobs are shielded from the direct influences of competitive forces in the external market (Doeringer & Piore, 1971).

The main thesis of the segmented or dual labor market theory posits that the labor market is divided into a primary and a secondary sector (Doeringer & Piore, 1971, p. 165; Rank, 1994). The theory argues that "the law of one price will not prevail in labor markets, even in the long run" (Rebitzer & Robinson, 1991, p. 710). Equilibrium in labor markets will instead be characterized by the rationing of primary jobs—jobs that offer high wages and large returns to education and experience. As a result of this rationing, even some capable workers willing to accept primary jobs at going wages will be pushed into low-wage, secondary jobs (Rebitzer & Robinson, 1991). The theory advances its argument based on



Doeringer and Piore (1971)'s characterization of a primary labor market as one composed of jobs in large firms and unionized jobs, which tend to be better jobs—higher paying, more promotion possibilities, better working conditions, more stable work, equity, and due process in the administration of work rules (Doeringer & Piore, 1971, p. 165). The secondary labor market, which largely overlaps sections of the external labor market, contains the low-paid jobs held by workers who are discriminated against and have unstable working patterns (Cain, 1976).

The theory also asserts that disadvantaged workers are confined to the secondary market by residence, inadequate skills, poor work histories, and discrimination (Doeringer & Piore, 1971, p. 166). Employment in the secondary labor market needs to provide job security, wages, and working conditions to stabilize the working relationship (Doeringer & Piore, 1971, p. 170). This is primarily due to employers in the secondary labor market needing help to establish internal labor market conditions to reduce turnover economically. Moreover, the attitudes and demographic traits of the secondary labor force may be such that workers are not encouraged to place value on job security (Doeringer & Piore, 1971). The effects of discrimination, other systemic factors, or even random factors that start workers off in the secondary sector—or in “bad” jobs—can shape “tastes for work” in an anti-work direction and thereby reinforce the disadvantaged position of low-wage workers. The theoretical model suggests an aspect of the “vicious circle” or “self-fulfilling prophecy” (Cain, 1976, p. 1223).

### **Workforce Development and Labor Market Dependency**

Subscribing to market dominance has led to path-dependent policy decisions with increasing returns (Pierson, 2000) that further solidify employer-centered workforce development and labor matching without addressing the conditions of discrimination in the secondary labor market. Workforce development strategies, in principle, are designed to engage dual customer bases—both the supply and demand sides of the labor market. However, the path-dependent nature limits the model as more slanted toward working from the employers' demands than that equally balances jobseekers' needs, especially in the low-wage labor market. Government serves as a proxy to “reinforce the employers' demands,” whereby

... market stays constant, and the job seekers become variables in the equation of top-down labor matching that is designed to bring together the low-skilled workers (labor supply) and the employers with low-paying jobs (labor demand). (Hong, 2008, p. 29)

Rather than addressing the structural dependence in labor mismatch by seeking system change from the demand side (Hong & Wernet, 2007), workforce development has become an exercise to screen for or enhance the “qualities and capabilities” of workers themselves (Melendez & Harrison, 1998, p. 3).

According to Holzer (1998), absenteeism and basic skill readiness were identified as potential problems for former welfare recipients seeking employment based on his study of employers. During the employer screening process, credentials such as a high school diploma, work experience, and references are widely used (Holzer, 1998). Notably, specific experience/training and passage of certain tests are required by some employers. Based on these screening devices, the top-down matching process begins by preparing welfare leavers to become work-ready or employable.

Along this line, Wilson (1996) argued that African Americans, more than any other major racial or ethnic groups, faced negative perceptions—uneducated, unstable, uncooperative, and dishonest—about their qualifications and work ethic. Seventy-four percent of the 170 employers interviewed in his study expressed negative feelings toward inner-city workers in job skills, basic skills, work ethic, dependability, attitudes, and interpersonal skills. Employer comments about inner-city black males revealed a wide range of complaints, including assertions that they procrastinate, are lazy, belligerent, and dangerous, have high rates of tardiness and absenteeism, carry employment histories with many job turn-overs, and frequently fail to pass drug screening tests. This sometimes leads to statistical discrimination and adverse hiring decisions.

### **Social Innovation in Secondary Labor Market Development**

According to Stanford Center for Social Innovation, social innovation develops and deploys effective solutions to challenging and often systemic social and environmental issues to support social progress. The key to innovation is to break away from the traditional market-driven research, evaluation, community action, and policy advocacy and to drive the market with participant-centered knowledge. Social innovation is generated from the spirit of human-centered values and collaborative relationships. Along these lines, instead of assuming the structural conditions of PoC in the secondary labor market as given, Mohan's (2020) NSD framework can help bring HSD processes through bottom-up, innovative approaches to build the postmaterial identity of individuals, communities, and nation-states for human-societal transformation to achieve freedom- and justice-based civil society (Mohan, 2010, 2020, 2022).

Baumgartner and Jones (1994) note, "as various parts of an issue come to the political forefront, or as developments in one issue area affect those in another, issues are redefined, and new political forces are given advantage or are hurt" (p. 51). Changing the issue's tone from negative to positive can challenge and minimize the policy monopoly—often exercised by small groups or institutional structures that control decision-making. Redefinition of issues is important in the policy process because "agreement on a particular issue definition almost always implies a consensus about what government should do" (Baumgartner & Jones, 1994, p. 52). A new consensus on the actionable problem definition of welfare dependency and self-sufficiency could emerge with an agreement that

the employment-based solutions—absent of human-centered design—will not be sustainable. Opportunities for social innovation may exist in empowering and strengthening the secondary labor market to become an environment conducive to HSD.

**PSS-I and TIP: Supply Side Theory and Intervention**

To refine the logical disconnect that was identified in Figure 1, the “employment” box can be replaced with “psychological self-sufficiency (PSS).” The new problem definition is illustrated in the bottom boxes in Figure 2. PSS at the individual level (PSS-I) represents an appropriate response to psychological barriers to help job-seekers reach economic self-sufficiency within the employer-defined workforce development system—referred to as being plagued by “broken links” in the system (Hong, Holland, Park, & Kim, 2023). Based on the human-centered theory and metrics of PSS-I process that originated from community participants in job training programs, one can link the longitudinal PSS-I data to various holistic HSD outcomes that are related to workforce development—for example, youth empowerment, fatherhood, motherhood, and family strengthening, health promotion, behavioral/mental health strengthening, substance use prevention and

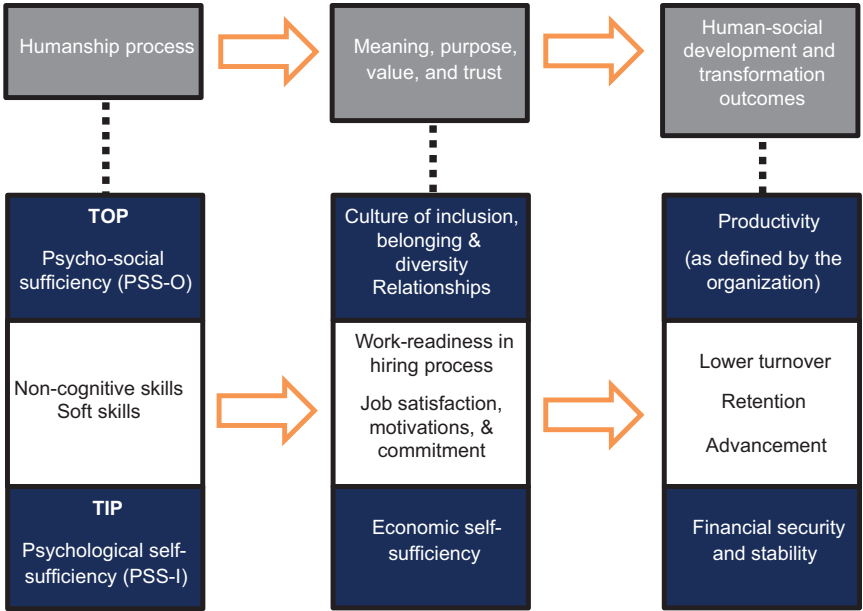


Figure 2 Achieving HSD through TIP-TOP integration. HSD: human-social development; TIP-TOP: Transforming Impossible into Possible-Transforming Opportunities into Productivity.

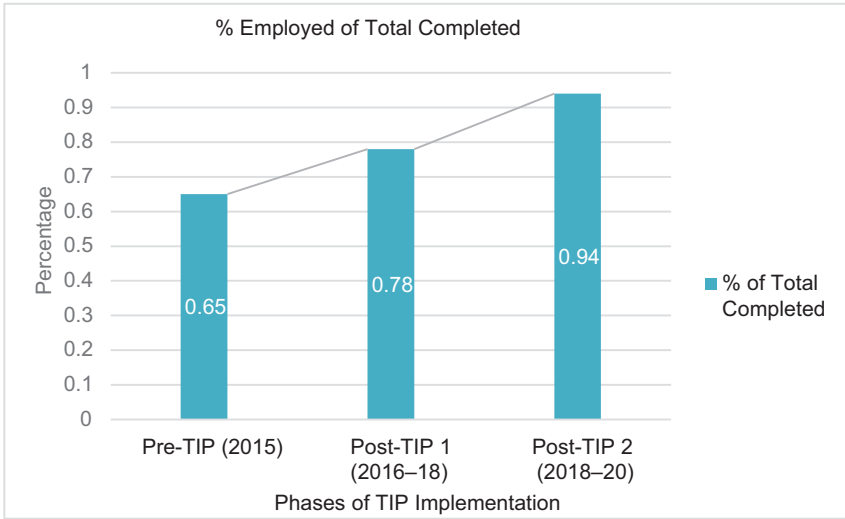
treatment, housing stability for homeless and under-housed, second chance citizen reentry, veterans well-being, employee engagement, violence prevention, etc.

PSS-I is an HSD theory in social work that explains how “individual agents create transformative systemic change within the global context of PoC and structural dependence of poverty” (Hong, 2021, p. 62). It describes an individualized goal-directed process of moving forward by switching from context- and population-specific perceived individual and structural barriers to goal-targeted hope actions (Hong, 2013, 2021). PSS-I is a bottom-up, process-based theory that originated by empirically connecting how participants viewed and defined the concept of self-sufficiency and success in workforce development (Hong, 2013; Hong, Northcut, Spira, & Hong, 2019; Hong, Sherriff, & Naeger, 2009). The constructs of employment hope and perceived employment barriers were validated in the United States (Hong, Choi & Key, 2018; Hong, Polanin, & Pigott, 2012) and internationally (Choi, Hong, & Kim, 2017; Hong, Song, Choi, & Park, 2016, 2018).

PSS-I has been found to strengthen career pathways and financial capability in workforce development programs delivered by Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act one-stop career centers and other contracted job readiness training programs (Hong, Holland et al., 2023; Hong, O’Brien et al., 2019; Hong, Wathen, Shin, Yoon, & Park, 2022). Also, PSS-I has been applied and tested among the summer youth employment program participants and was found to explain what may be inside the “black box” of how vulnerable youth become empowered to reach their goals (Hong, Hong, & Choi, 2020). Further, recent studies have confirmed that PSS is enhanced and nurtured by strong, authentic staff relationships (Hong, Hong, Lewis, & Williams, 2020; Hong, Kim, Hong, Park, & Lewis, 2020). Therefore, PSS could be widely incorporated into workforce development programs and formative and summative evaluation processes.

PSS-I may show up in soft and non-cognitive skills during the job search process and in the workplace after being employment. Studies show that most employers consider soft or non-cognitive skills highly desirable in building and sustaining a workforce (Dixon, Belnap, Albrecht, & Lee, 2010; Heckman & Kautz, 2012; Succi & Canovi, 2020). As depicted in the middle white boxes in Figure 2, a win-win problem definition provides an opportunity to invest in strengthening soft skills as a common ground solution for employers and job seekers. Employers growingly expect potential workers to demonstrate soft skills to signal work readiness during the hiring process, and jobseekers will present these skills as predictors of their future ability to manage job satisfaction, motivation, and commitment. As a result, both parties benefit from lower turnover (or increased retention) and career advancement opportunities.

As such, one social work practice model called Transforming Impossible into Possible (TIP) was designed based on the PSS-I theory (Hong, 2016) and was found to build trusting, caring, and supportive relationships with staff and peers with its core neurobiological content in its curriculum (Hong & Hong, 2019). Preliminary 2-year employment and retention findings from the TIP program offered through job readiness training at a vocational training organization were



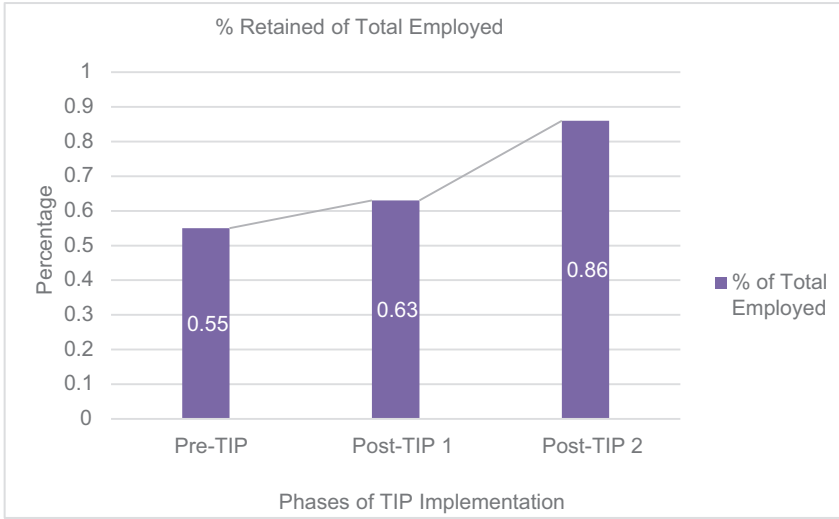
**Figure 3** Employment rate change from TIP integration in vocational training. TIP: Transforming Impossible into Possible.

reported to have increased the employment rate from 65% to 78% and the job retention rate from 60% to 71% (Hong, Choi, & Hong, 2020). These numbers were updated in a 4-year report where the employment rate went from 65%, 78% to 94% (Figure 3) and the job retention rate from a revised 55%, 63% to 86% (Figure 4). TIP is effective in the context of fatherhood (Hong, Lewis, Park, Hong, & Davies, 2021), substance use disorder recovery (Hong, Kim, Marley, & Park, 2021), and financial capability (Hong, Shin, Wathen, & Gibbons, 2023) in the United States and in the Self-Sufficiency Program (SSP) in South Korea (Hong et al., 2020).

### **PSS-O and TOP: Demand Side Theory and Intervention**

As Mohan (2020) mentioned, “annihilation of the forces of oppression entails a heavy burden on ‘individual agency’” (p. 49). While it is notable to see that PSS at the individual level (PSS-I)—switching barriers to hope actions toward employment—is activated and measurable labor market outcomes were achieved through participation in TIP, this cannot be sustained without full competition by employers to search for and hire based on these qualities. Further, these qualities must be essential to employee engagement and organizational development.

The bottom-up change ought to challenge the other side of the equation to match the success of the individual transformation. It needs to be supported by inclusive opportunity structures of the ... system—promoting a



**Figure 4** Retention rate change from TIP integration in vocational training.  
TIP: Transforming Impossible into Possible.

pro-equity organizational culture of psycho-social sufficiency (PSS-O) or co-sufficiency that embrace the PSS-I process of each member agent—to sustain long-term success with adequate positive reinforcement and returns from ... institutions. (Hong, 2021, p. 77)

In uprooting PoC through NSD (Mohan, 2010, 2020), PSS-I and PSS-O should be intentionally, purposefully, and systematically connected to bring about the HSD and social transformation outcomes (see Figure 2). A supply-demand mismatch can be bridged by aligning the PSS-O process with PSS-I's barriers-to-hope movement, by which a transcendent concept of humans can encompass the common ground qualities of soft skills and non-cognitive skills. According to Hong (2016), humanship is defined as “leadership in one’s life or self-sponsorship through finding an optimal balance between awareness and action by focusing on one’s internal locus of control” (p. 100). Investing in PSS-I at the individual level and PSS-O at the organizational level, human development culture can emerge in one’s journey or workplace human resource management and engagement.

PSS-O can be augmented by providing a supportive environment for PSS-I to connect in the workplace. Without having to address the details and process each individual’s PSS-I context, TOP can use a behavioral economics approach to nudge individuals with a reminder that everyone is “TIPPING” (program term for enacting PSS-I by switching barriers to hope actions) through as they show up in the workplace by which the self-sufficiency (PSS-I) focus transfers to co-sufficiency (PSS-O). When an individual’s meaning, purpose, value, and trust become foundational to the organizational culture of inclusion, belonging, diversity, and

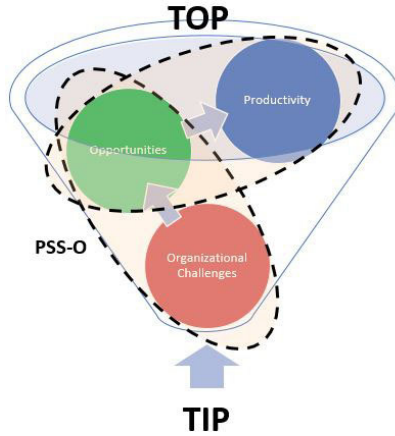


Figure 5 TOP model.

TOP: Transforming Opportunities into Productivity; TIP: Transforming Impossible into Possible; PSS: Psycho-social sufficiency.

positive relationships, productivity, as defined by organizations, will be a natural outcome closely aligned with HSD and social transformation. Through labor market development, the NSD paradigm can guide the bottom-up and top-down HSD processes and support civil society building based on freedom and justice to overcome PoC (Mohan, 2020, 2022).

The TOP is an HSD approach for human-centered business hiring and employee engagement practice—particularly targeting, but not limited to, for-profit, non-profit, and public organizations that employ low-income, low-skilled workers. To develop an inclusive labor market system, TOP advances the core PSS-I theory that guides the implementation of the TIP program at the individual level—the supply side of the labor market. And the PSS-O theory provides the foundation for TOP in application to the demand-side organizational development tool designed to interlock with TIP to create an inclusive workplace culture of worker engagement, development, inclusion, connection, and growth. As seen in Figure 5, TOP’s “opportunities” are found in the individuals as they relationally and collectively build a “TIPPING” culture of humanship when facing organizational challenges—in individual tasks, team performance, workplace relationships, morale, etc. PSS-I opens the door for system transformation to begin personally with TIP and nudge the next system to respond with PSS-O with TOP.

### Conclusion

TOP is a demand-side organizational tool designed to interlock with TIP to create, in workforce development settings, a culture of employee engagement from the hiring process to developing a personalized connection to the positions into which new employees are hired. By focusing on labor market development, particularly

in the secondary labor market, TOP has the potential to play an instrumental role in creating system change by anchoring on TIP as the organizing principle for social innovation and social transformation in the 4th industrial revolution through its commitment to genuine “empathy” needed in the design thinking process. TOP’s contribution to workforce development may be: (1) preparing and maximizing the potential of the newly entering workers (supply-side concern); and (2) empowering the incumbent workers for increased retention and productivity (demand-side concern) by connecting the purpose, motivation, aspirations, and goals in their vocational pursuits.

Furthermore, TOP can unlock the “structurally truncated” pathway component of hope in PSS-I that may have been caused by inadequate financial returns to meet family economic needs (Edin & Lein, 1997). Structural barriers need to be removed to open the blocked pathways to complement the agency component of hope in PSS-I (Hong, Hodge, & Choi, 2015). TOP will establish an imperative for employers to compete for candidates in the low-wage labor market whose PSS-I as a jobseeker is activated just as how they will compete for quality job opportunities that demonstrate the culture of PSS-O with on-the-job support for continuous progress in PSS-I as an employee. These organizational retention and advancement strategies will trigger further social transformation with employers becoming policy advocates for their employees as Hong et al. (2015) cite Edin and Lein’s (1997) recommendations for structural interventions that focus on:

Improving the quality of education and training programs that lead to living wages, providing transitional child care and health care benefits for welfare leavers, and expanding the Unemployment Insurance coverage of workers in the low-wage sector, including part-time workers ... Raising the state minimum wage close to locally adjusted living wage would also make the pathway component a possibility in one’s imaginative map in attaining the [employment] goal. (p. 162)

TOP can help lay the foundation for PSS as the organizing principle for creating jobseeker-centered workplaces in an age when every service delivery is couched as patient/customer/person-centered approaches. Further research is necessary, examining the effectiveness of the TOP-based approach in various workforce/industry settings and with varied populations of workers toward improving hiring and worker engagement practices and outcomes. TOP implementation studies can be scaled to widely test the degree to which such an intervention could help (1) invigorate PSS, (2) increase self-regulation and executive functioning as a proxy for soft and non-cognitive skills among workers; (3) yield significant impacts on labor market outcomes and economic self-sufficiency, and (4) reduce the turnover rate for employers.

In keeping with Hong and Crawley’s (2015) proposal to transform the welfare state crisis into an opportunity for bottom-up strategies for making the local labor market system more inclusive, TOP can promote HSD within the NSD paradigm



to bridge the policy gap in welfare reform between “personal responsibility” and “work opportunity” to sustain individual efforts. Market values should be complemented with greater emphasis on community and cooperation (Dolbeare & Dolbeare, 1973) and individualism accompanied by a common good vision in a mutually dependent society (Hong & Wernet, 2007). Economic mobility in an interdependent society is a relational process based on trust and reciprocity between education and workforce development institutions; workers and firms; and families, firms, and children’s schools (Iversen & Armstrong, 2006). As NSD’s HSD approach, TOP can contribute to achieving a civil society based on freedom and justice (Mohan, 2010).

## References

- Bachrach, P., & Baratz, M. (1963). Decisions and nondecisions: An analytical framework. *The American Political Science Review*, 57(3), 632–642. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1952568>
- Baumgartner, F., & Jones, B. (1993). *Agendas and instability in American politics*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Baumgartner, F., & Jones, B. (1994). Attention, boundary effects, and large-scale policy change in air transportation policy. In D. Rochefort & R. Cobb (Eds.), *The politics of problem definition: Shaping the policy agenda* (pp. 50–66). Lawrence, KS: The University Press of Kansas.
- Blau, F., Ferber, M., & Winkler, A. (1998). *The economics of women, men, and work*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Block, F. (1977). The ruling class does not rule Notes on the Marxist theory of the state. *Socialist Revolution*, 33, 6–27.
- Bowles, S., & Gintis, H. (1986). *Democracy and capitalism: Property, community, and the contradictions of modern social thought*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Cain, G. (1976). The challenges of segmented labor market theories to orthodox theory: A survey. *Journal of Economic Literature*, 14(4), 1215–1257.
- Choi, S., Hong, P. Y. P., & Kim, H. (2017). Development and evaluation of psychological self-sufficiency program in Korea: A demonstration project at the Gyonggi Regional Centers. *Journal of Korean Social Welfare Administration*, 19, 179–199 [In Korean].
- Danziger, S. (1999). *Welfare reform policy from Nixon to Clinton: What role for social science?* Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research.
- Dixon, J., Belnap, C., Albrecht, C., & Lee, K. (2010). The importance of soft skills. *Corporate Finance Review*, 14(6), 35.
- Doeringer, P., & Piore, M. (1971). *Internal labor markets and manpower analysis*. Lexington, MA: Heath Lexington Books.
- Dolbeare, K. M., & Dolbeare, P. (1973). *American ideologies: The competing political beliefs of the 1970s*. Chicago, IL: Markham.
- Edin, K., & Lein, L. (1997). *Making ends meet: How single mothers survive welfare and low-wage work*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

- Finder, A. (1996, August 25). Welfare clients outnumber jobs they might fill. *The New York Times*, p. 1.1.
- Fraser, N., & Gordon, L. (1994). A genealogy of dependency: Tracing a keyword of the U.S. welfare state. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 19(2), 309–336. <https://doi.org/10.1086/494886>
- Hacker, J. S. (2019). *The great risk shift: The new economic insecurity and the decline of the American dream*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Heckman, J. J., & Kautz, T. (2012). Hard evidence on soft skills. *Labour Economics*, 19(4), 451–464. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.labeco.2012.05.014>
- Holzer, H. (1998). *Will employers hire welfare recipients? Recent survey evidence from Michigan*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin–Madison, Institute for Research on Poverty.
- Hong, P. Y. P. (2008). Globalizing structural poverty: Reclaiming hope for children and families. *Illinois Child Welfare*, 4(1), 23–38.
- Hong, P. Y. P. (2013). Toward a client-centered benchmark for self-sufficiency: Evaluating the “process” of becoming job ready. *Journal of Community Practice*, 21(4), 356–378. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10705422.2013.852147>
- Hong, P. Y. P. (2016). Transforming Impossible into Possible (TIP): A bottom-up practice in workforce development for low-income jobseekers. *Environment and Social Psychology*, 2(1), 93–104. <https://doi.org/10.18063/ESP.2016.02.008>
- Hong, P. Y. P. (2021). Health psychological self-sufficiency (Health-PSS): A bottom-up human-social development approach to health equity. *Social Development Issues*, 43(3), 57–84. <https://doi.org/10.3998/sdi.2811>
- Hong, P. Y. P., Choi, S., & Hong, R. (2020). A randomized controlled trial study of Transforming Impossible into Possible (TIP) policy experiment in South Korea. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 30(6), 587–596. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049731519894647>
- Hong, P. Y. P., Choi, S., & Key, W. (2018). Psychological self-sufficiency: A bottom-up theory of change in workforce development. *Social Work Research*, 42(1), 22–32. <https://doi.org/10.1093/swr/svx025>
- Hong, P. Y. P., & Crawley, B. (2015). Welfare dependency and poverty: A neoliberal rhetoric or evidence-based policy choice. In S. N. Haymes, M. Vidal de Haymes, & R. J. Miller (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of poverty* (pp. 131–142). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hong, P. Y. P., Hodge, D. R., & Choi, S. (2015). Spirituality, hope, and self-sufficiency among low-income job seekers. *Social Work*, 60(2), 155–164. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swu059>
- Hong, P. Y. P., Holland, B., Park, J. H., & Kim, C. K. (2023). Broken links in the workforce development system: The social-human development need for assessing psychological self-sufficiency. *Social Development Issues*, 44(3), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.3998/sdi.3708>
- Hong, P. Y. P., Hong, R., & Choi, S. (2020). Validation of the employment hope scale among summer youth employment program participants. *Children*

- and *Youth Services Review*, 111, 104811. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2020.104811>
- Hong, P. Y. P., Hong, R., Lewis, D., & Williams, D. (2020). Pathway of employment from uncovering barriers to discovering hope: Non-traditional, student-centered, relationship-based approach. *Families in Society*, 101(3), 395–408. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1044389419864228>
- Hong, P. Y. P., Kim, C., Hong, R., Park, J. H., & Lewis, D. (2020). Examining psychological self-sufficiency among African American low-income jobseekers in a health profession career pathway program. *Social Work in Health Care*, 59(3), 139–160. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00981389.2019.1704467>
- Hong, P. Y. P., Kim, S. H., Marley, J., & Park, J. H. (2021). Transforming Impossible into Possible (TIP) for SUD recovery: A promising practice innovation to combat the opioid crisis. *Social Work in Health Care*, 60(6–7), 509–528. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00981389.2021.1958127>
- Hong, P. Y. P., Lewis, D., Park, J. H., Hong, R., & Davies, E. (2021). Transforming Impossible into Possible (TIP) for fatherhood: An empowerment-based social work intervention. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 31(8), 826–835. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10497315211004743>
- Hong, P. Y. P., O'Brien, T., Park, J. H., Hong, R., Pigott, T., & Holland, B. (2019). Psychological self-sufficiency: An empowerment-based theory for workforce training and adult education. In C. King & P. Y. P. Hong (Eds.), *Pathways to careers in healthcare: Evaluation of recent partnerships* (pp. 303–349). Kalamazoo, MI: Upjohn.
- Hong, P. Y. P., Polanin, J. R., & Pigott, T. D. (2012). Validation of the employment hope scale: Measuring psychological self-sufficiency among low-income jobseekers. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 22(3), 323–332. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049731511435952>
- Hong, P. Y. P., Sheriff, V. A., & Naeger, S. R. (2009). A bottom-up definition of self-sufficiency: Voices from low-income jobseekers. *Qualitative Social Work*, 8(3), 357–376. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325009337844>
- Hong, P. Y. P., Shin, A., Wathen, M. V., & Gibbons, T. (2023). Transforming Impossible into Possible (TIP) for Financial Capability: Application of practice-based program theory and measures in intervention design. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 33(6), 695–710. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10497315231179643>
- Hong, P. Y. P., Song, I. H., Choi, S., & Park, J. H. (2016). A cross-national validation of the short employment hope scale (EHS-14) in the United States and South Korea. *Social Work Research*, 40(1), 41–51. <https://doi.org/10.1093/swr/svv046>
- Hong, P. Y. P., Song, I. H., Choi, S., & Park, J. H. (2018). Comparison of perceived employment barriers among low-income jobseekers in the United States and South Korea. *International Social Work*, 61(1), 23–39. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872815600509>

- Hong, P. Y. P., Wathen, M. V., Shin, A. J., Yoon, I., & Park, J. H. (2022). Psychological self-sufficiency and financial literacy among low-income participants: An empowerment-based approach to financial capability. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, 43, 690–702. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10834-022-09865-w>
- Hong, P. Y. P., & Wernet, S. P. (2007). Structural reinterpretation of poverty by examining working poverty: Implications for community and policy practice. *Families in Society*, 88(3), 361–373. <https://doi.org/10.1606/1044-3894.3645>
- Hong, R., & Hong, P. Y. P. (2019). Neurobiological core content in the research-supported Transforming Impossible into Possible (TIP) program model. *Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work*, 16(5), 497–510. <https://doi.org/10.1080/26408066.2019.1629140>
- Hong, R., Northcut, T. B., Spira, M., & Hong, P. Y. P. (2019). Facilitating transformation in workforce training: Using clinical theory to understand psychological self-sufficiency. *Smith College Studies in Social Work*, 89(1), 66–82. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00377317.2019.1577046>
- Iceland, J. (1997). Urban labor markets and individual transitions out of poverty. *Demography*, 34(3), 429–441. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3038295>
- Iversen, R. R., & Armstrong, A. L. (2006). *Jobs aren't enough: Toward a new economic mobility for low-income families*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Jennings, J. (1994). *Understanding the nature of poverty in urban America*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Lindblom, C. (1977). *Politics and markets: The world's political-economic systems*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Lindblom, C. (1982). The market as prison. *Journal of Politics*, 44, 324–336. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2130588>
- Lindblom, C., & Woodhouse, E. J. (1993). *The policy making process* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Prentice-Hall.
- Melendez, E., & Harrison, B. (1998). Matching the disadvantaged to job opportunities: Structural explanations for the past successes of the Center for Employment Training. *Economic Development Quarterly*, 12(1), 3–11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124249801200101>
- Miliband, R. (1969). *The state in capitalist society*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Mohan, B. (1999). *Unification of social work: Rethinking social transformation*. Westport, CT: Praeger Pub Text.
- Mohan, B. (2007). *Fallacies of development: Crises of human and social development*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers.
- Mohan, B. (2010). Toward a new social development. In M. S. Pawar & D. R. Cox (Eds.), *Social development: Critical themes and perspectives* (pp. 205–223). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Mohan, B. (2011). *Development, poverty of culture, and social policy*. New York, NY: Springer.

- Mohan, B. (2020). Ideologies of development. *Social Development Issues*, 42(2), 47–53. <https://doi.org/10.3998/sdi.17872073.0042.205>
- Mohan, B. (2022). Social contract two: Revisiting social development. *Social Development Issues*, 43(1), 82–91. <https://doi.org/10.3998/sdi.1817>
- Nathan, R. P. (1986). The underclass—will it always be with us? Unpublished paper, quoted by Wilson, W. J. “Social policy and minority groups: What might have been and what might we see in the future.” In G. D. Sandefur & M. Tienda (Eds.), *Divided opportunities: Minorities, poverty, and social policy* (pp. 231–252). New York, NY: Plenum.
- Pierson, P. (2000). Increasing returns, path dependence, and the study of politics. *American Political Science Review*, 94, 251–267. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2586011>
- Przeworski, A., & Wallerstein, M. (1988). Structural dependence of the state on capital. *American Political Science Review*, 82(1), 11–29. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1958056>
- Rank, M. (1994). *Living on the edge: The realities of welfare in America*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Rebitzer, J., & Robinson, M. (1991). Employer size and dual labor markets. *The Review of Economic and Statistics*, 73(4), 710–715. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2109411>
- Rocheftort, D. A., & Cobb, R. (1994). *The politics of problem definition: Shaping the policy agenda*. Lawrence, KS: The University Press of Kansas.
- Schiller, B. R. (2001). *The economics of poverty and discrimination* (8th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Secombe, K. (2007). “So you think I drive a Cadillac?”: *Welfare recipients’ perspectives on the system and its reform*. New York, NY: Pearson.
- Smith, M. A. (1999). Public opinion, elections, and representation within a market economy: Does the structural power of business undermine popular sovereignty? *American Journal of Political Science*, 43, 842–863. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2991837>
- Succi, C., & Canovi, M. (2020). Soft skills to enhance graduate employability: Comparing students and employers’ perceptions. *Studies in Higher Education*, 45(9), 1834–1847. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1585420>
- Thurow, L. (1975). *Generating inequality: Mechanisms of distribution in the U.S. economy*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Weir, M. (1992). *Politics and jobs: The boundaries of employment policy in the United States*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Wilson, W. J. (1996). *When work disappears: The world of the new urban poor*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf.