Ready for Work:
Preparing Low-Income Adults for Employment through Job Readiness Training

A dissertation proposal presented to the faculty of
The Department of Sociology and the Heller School for Social Policy and Management
Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts
by
Sara Chaganti, MS, MA

The American federal government has invested in job training for disadvantaged workers since the New Deal; however, the nature of this training has changed over the years. Traditionally, job training has taught technical or "hard" skills, such as how to operate factory machinery or build roads and bridges. In recent years, the focus has moved to Job Readiness Training, short-term training focused on job search and quick placement in any job, and the behaviors and attitudes that job seekers should display in the interview and once in the workplace. Job Readiness Training is widely prescribed for many unemployed populations, and is particularly popular in workforce programs for disadvantaged populations with very low incomes.

This dissertation will consider Job Readiness Training programs for low-income people, examining both trainers' and participants' attitudes, understanding and aspirations through interviews and participant observation. Analysis of these qualitative data, along with review and analysis of Job Readiness Training curricula, will inform questions about what it means to be employable in the unstable labor markets of twenty-first century advanced capitalism, how low-income job seekers understand the symbols of employability that they are being taught, and the significance of the generic ideal worker prototype for our larger cultural conceptions of employment. Exploring these questions will also offer insight into the effectiveness of Job Readiness Training on its own and as a strategy embedded within a larger matrix of anti-poverty policies.

This dissertation will have important implications for workforce development policy and practice, and for the larger sociological study of work and its meaning in social life. Interrogating the prescriptive ideal worker type and the assumptions behind it will offer insight into how we navigate multiple and sometimes conflicting cultural norms, particularly in a period when employment relationships are increasingly tenuous. And assessing an anti-poverty policy strategy based on behaviors, values and attitudes will inform larger questions about our cultural understandings of the causes and experiences of poverty and unemployment, and our priorities in addressing these issues. This dissertation will incorporate multiple stakeholder perspectives to yield a set of policy and program alternatives for low-income job seekers.

Dissertation Committee: Carmen Sirianni, PhD, Chair
                                    Janet Boguslaw, PhD
                                    Laura Miller, PhD
                                    Thomas Shapiro, PhD
                                    Steven Vallas, PhD, Northeastern University

Dissertation Hearing: Tuesday April 28, 2015, 3:30pm
                                      Pearlman Hall, Room 201