

THE ETHICS OF THE SOCIAL WORKERS IN PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY ASPECT IN CONTEXT OF PRACTICE IN VIETNAM

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Abstract: The purpose of this article was to evaluate the current situation about understanding and ethical behavior of social workers in practical activities in professional responsibility aspect. The study used a designed scale of professional ethics in professional responsibility aspect to collect data. The study used descriptive data collection methods. The participants of this research were 396 social workers (female = 276, male = 120) who had been working in hospitals, social work service centers, childcare education centers in Hanoi, Thanh Hoa and Quang Ninh. The research results show that: Firstly, many social workers were not responsible for their work and still supported clients when they were weak or overload at work. Secondly, the majority of social workers did not comply with information privacy and informed consent principles when providing services to clients. Thirdly, more than a half of the participants did not regularly study professional documentations to improve their professional capacity. Fourthly, nearly half of the social workers provided services outside the scope of education and training.

Keywords: Ethical behavior, professional responsibility, professional ethics, social workers.

I. INTRODUCTION

Ethics are a critical component to any profession, especially important to professions rooted in health and human services (Gregory Achen, 2013). Laura Rodica Giurgiu and Mircea Adrian Marica (2013) affirmed that social work is one of the professions in which the ethical values play an important role. Erik Blennberger (2006) argued that ethics is the foundation of the social work profession. Like other professions such as medicine, nursing, law, psychology, counseling, and engineering, social work has developed a comprehensive set of ethical standards. These standards have evolved over time, reflecting significant changes in the broader culture and in social work's mission, methods, and priorities (Reamer, 2013). There have many studies been done on the ethical issues of social workers in practice. Those studies mentioned mainly about general ethical violations of social workers, violations of dural relationships, violations of information security and poor capacity in practice.

In recent years, social work profession in Vietnam has been affirming its role and mission towards equal development and social progress. Currently, the legal corridor of the social work in Vietnam is gradually being completed such as Circular No. 01/2017/TT-BLDTBXH on professional ethical standards for social workers, issued by the Ministry of Labour - Invalids and Social Affairs on February 2, 2017). However, up to now, professional ethics is still a relatively new concept for a young profession like social work. In Vietnam, there have not many researches been published in the field of professional ethics of social workers.

The purpose of this article is to evaluate the current situation about understanding and ethical behavior of Vietnamese social workers in practice in professional responsibility aspect. We assumed that the majority of social workers are at a fair level of knowledge and ethical behavior in supporting people with special circumstances.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Around the world, there were many researches related to the ethical of social workers in professional responsibility aspect. According to the ethical principles laid down for social workers, ethical awareness is a fundamental part of professional practice, and hence the ability and commitment to act ethically are crucial aspects

of the quality of the services offered by social workers (Maija Mänttari-van der Kuip, 2016: 88). Congress and McAuliffe (2006: 161) pointed out that social workers frequently must revise and update ethical practice standards and codes in accordance with new knowledge and emerging practice issues. When it comes to helping clients, Banks (1995: 89) argued that social workers should follow code ethics depending on different societies and historical contexts because there is no absolute ethic rule.

Since social work has always been a value-based profession, ethical codes have long been essential to social work education and practice round the world. Countries have similarities and differences in their social work ethical codes. An analysis of the structure and content of the codes of ethics of 10 countries such as the professional associations of the United States (NASW), the United Kingdom (BASW), Canada (CASW), Ireland (IASW), Australia (AASW), Sweden, Korea (KASW), Japan (JASW), Singapore (SASW) and Vietnam, found a high level of congruence in relation to stated values and principles, but variation in practical guidance. We also found that the Codes emphasized the responsibilities, ethical behavior and professional expectations of social workers (AASW, 2010: 15). Social workers should practice within their capacity and choosing to practice beyond their capabilities is an ethical violation, not an ethical dilemma (Allan Edward Barsky, 2010: 6). In addition, social workers should not allow their own personal problems, psychosocial distress, legal problems, substance abuse, or mental health difficulties to interfere with their professional judgment and performance or to jeopardize the best interests of people for whom they have a professional responsibility. In cases of social workers whose personal problems, psychosocial distress, legal problems, substance abuse, or mental health difficulties interfere with their professional judgment and performance should immediately seek consultation and take appropriate remedial action by seeking professional help, making adjustments in workload, terminating practice, or taking any other steps necessary to protect clients and others (NASW, 2017: 21; AASW, 2010: 21). Currently, the legal corridor of the social work in Vietnam has gradually been completing, the Ministry of Labour - Invalids and Social Affairs issued Circular No. 01/2017/TT-BLDTBXH on professional ethical standards for social workers on February 2rd, 2017 (Circular 01 for short).

III. METHODOLOGY

Objects

The team sent 500 questionnaires to social workers who had been working in hospitals, social work service centers, childcare education centers in Hanoi, Thanh Hoa and Quang Ninh and received 396 valid votes (reaching the rate of 79.2%). Of these, 276 were female (69.7%) and 120 were male (30.3%). Age of the target group ranges from 20 to 55 years old, with a mean age of 30 years (Standard Deviation = 7.13). Regarding the training level, 10.35% of the objects were at intermediate level, 79.3% of the objects were at College and University degrees, and 10.35% of the subjects had master and doctor degrees. Regarding work experiences, 8.6% of objects had been working for less than 1 year, 31.3% of objects had been working from 1 to less than 3 years, 16.9% of objects had been working from 3 to less than 5 years, 26, 5% of objects had been working from 5 to less than 10 years and 16.7% of objects had been working over 10 years.

Research tools

Besides the social demographic information described as above, the research used a designed scale to collect data. Based on the analysis of 10 codes of professional ethics of social workers in 10 countries, namely USA, Canada, Sweden, UK, Ireland, Australia, Korea, Singapore, Japan and Vietnam (Circular No.01/2017/TT-BLDTBXH on professional ethical standards for social workers, issued by the Ministry of Labour - Invalids and Social Affairs on February 2rd, 2017). The authors built 14 ethical situations related to professional responsibility aspect in Vietnam today.

Data analysis

The statistical analysis was carried out using the program SPSS, v.23.0. In order to find out the current state of knowledge and ethical/unethical behavior of social workers, we performed Frequency calculator.

In the Reversal clauses, the answers were "Totally wrong" which demonstrated understanding and ethical behavior (for example: "I often try to help the client even when I am overloaded with work") are reversed during computation to ensure that the propositions follow one way.

IV. RESULTS

Table 1 shows the initial results of research on the current situation about understanding and ethical behavior of social workers in practice in professional responsibility aspect.

Table 1: Proportion of social workers with **CORRESPONDING ETHICAL/UNETHICAL ANSWER** in each situation in professional responsibility aspect

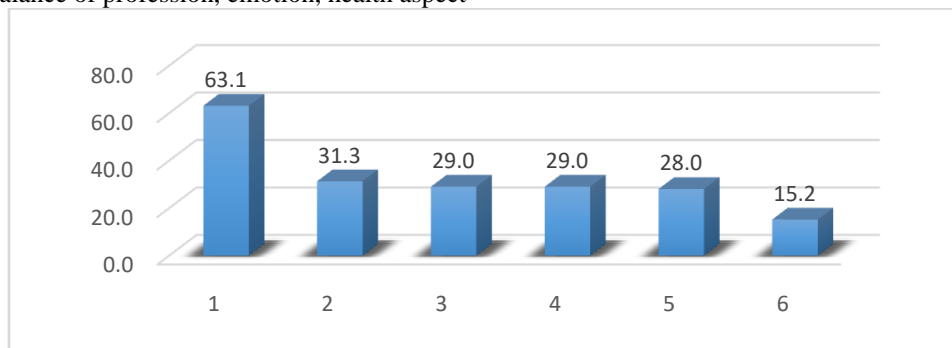
| Situations | Number of corresponding ethical answers | | Number of corresponding unethical answers | |
|---|---|------------|---|------------|
| | Amount | Percentage | Amount | Percentage |
| 1. I provided services in the scope of social work education and training. | 240 | 60.6 | 156 | 39.4 |
| 2. I regularly read the materials of social work profession to improve my skills | 174 | 43.9 | 222 | 56.1 |
| 3. I have attended an ethics training course on social work | 143 | 36.1 | 253 | 63.9 |
| 4. I refused to provide social work services when the client's problem did not match my narrow specialty | 143 | 36.1 | 253 | 63.9 |
| 5. I stopped providing services when the client did not need my assistance | 187 | 47.2 | 209 | 52.8 |
| 6. I am a responsible person | 250 | 63.1 | 146 | 36.9 |
| 7. I was full of pity for the client who experienced unfortunate things * | 60 | 15.2 | 336 | 84.8 |
| 8. I always have professional supporter and supervisor | 115 | 29.0 | 281 | 71.0 |
| 9. I tried to support the client even when I was weak* | 111 | 28.0 | 285 | 72.0 |
| 10. I often try to help the client even when I am overloaded with work * | 115 | 29.0 | 281 | 71.0 |
| 11. I helped a child without parents/guardian's consent * | 230 | 58.1 | 166 | 41.9 |
| 12. To help clients be more effective, I gathered clients' information from a various sources without client/guardian's consent * | 128 | 32.3 | 268 | 67.7 |
| 13. I told the client about the information which I had gathered from a relative or acquaintance | 24 | 6.1 | 372 | 93.9 |
| 14. I informed my client about the purpose of information collection, showed the client their test results. | 124 | 31.3 | 272 | 68.7 |

Note: * Reversal situations

Table 1 shows that the percentage of social workers who have corresponding ethical answers are very different among the indicators. This rate ranges from 6.1% to 63.1%, which implies large difference. In order to facilitate the tracking and analysis, we divided 14 expressions into 4 groups:

Group 1: Balance of profession, emotion, health

Figure 1: Proportion of social workers with corresponding ethical answer in balance of profession, emotion, health aspect



Notes:

1. I am a responsible person
2. I informed my client about the purpose of information collection, showed the client their test results.
3. I always have professional supporter and supervisor
4. I often try to help the client even when I am overloaded with work *
5. I tried to support the client even when I was weak*
6. I was full of pity for the client who experienced unfortunate things *

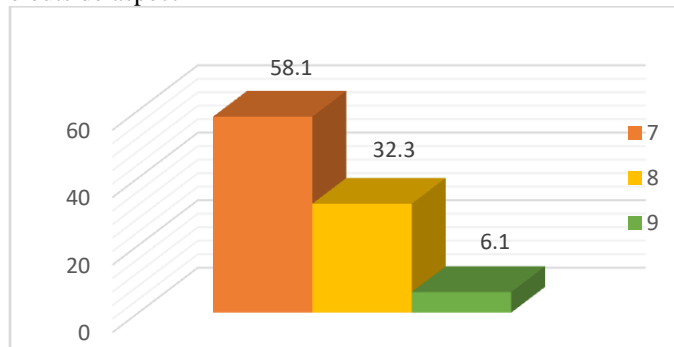
Figure 1 shows that the proportion of social workers had corresponding ethical answer in professional responsibility aspect is relatively low. Interestingly, when the question is “generic” such as “I am a responsible person”, up to 63.1% reported themselves like this.

The results also shows that 31.3% had corresponding ethical answer in situation “I informed my client about the purpose of information collection, showed the client their test results”. Thus, the remaining 2/3 of social workers did not “informed the client about the purpose of information collection”, in other words, they violated the code of ethics.

Besides, only 29.0% of people had corresponding ethical answer in situation “I always have professional supporter and supervisor”. In the situation “I often try to help the client even when I am overloaded with work”, only 29.0% of interviewees had corresponding ethical answer. This is a reversal situations, people choose the answer “totally wrong” to show their ethical understanding and behavior. The situation “I tried to support the client even when I was weak” is also a reversal, and only 28% of social workers had corresponding ethical answer. In addition, only 15% of people had ethical responses in the reversal situation “I was full of pity for the client who experienced unfortunate things”.

Group 2: Seeking support from the outside

Figure1:Proportion of social workers with corresponding ethical answer in Seeking support from the outside aspect



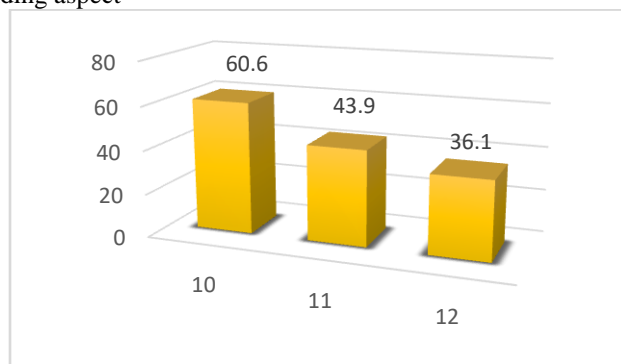
Notes:

- 7. I helped a child without parents/guardian's consent *
- 8. To help clients be more effective, I gathered clients' information from a various sources without client/guardian's consent *
- 9. I told the client about the information which I had gathered from a relative or acquaintance

Figure 2 shows that 58.1% of social workers had corresponding ethical answer in the situation “I helped a child without parents/guardian's consent”. This is a reversal situation, people choose the answer “totally wrong” to show their ethical understanding and behavior. In the reversal situation “To help clients be more effective, I gathered clients' information from a various sources without client/guardian's consent”, 32.3% of them had corresponding ethical answer. In addition, there are only 6.1% of social workers “told the client about the information which they had gathered from a relative or acquaintance”.

Group 3: Professional capacity building

Figure2:Proportion of social workers with corresponding ethical answer onses in Professional capacity building aspect



Notes:

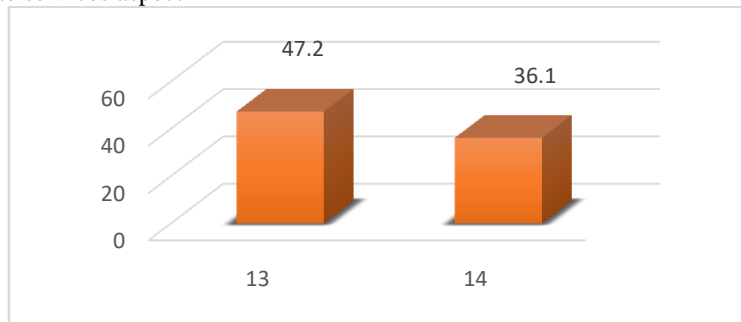
- 10. I provided services in the scope of social work education and training.
- 11. I regularly read the materials of social work profession to improve my skills
- 12. I have attended an ethics training course on social work

When being asked about “provided services in the scope of social work education and training”, 60.6% of people who had corresponding ethical answer. However, 38.9% of them had unethical awareness and behavior because of providing services outside the scope of professional education and training.

Figure 3 also shows that 43.9% of people “regularly read the materials of social work profession to improve their skills”. Thus, more than a half of the remaining social workers in Vietnam had not followed the ethical principle. Moreover, there are only 36.1% of social workers “having attended a training course on ethics in social work practice”.

Group 4: Providing appropriate services

Figure 3: Proportion of social workers with corresponding ethical answer in Providing appropriate services aspect



Notes:

- 13. I stopped providing services when the client did not need my assistance
- 14. I refused to provide social work services when the client's problem did not match my narrow specialty

Research result shows that only 47.2% of social workers had corresponding ethical answer in the situation “I stopped providing services when the client did not need my assistance”. Thus, more than half of the remaining social workers in Vietnam had not followed the ethical principles specified in Article 5.7 of Circular 01. In addition, only 36.1% of them had corresponding ethical answer in the situation “refused to provide social work services when the client's problem did not match their narrow specialty”.

Table 2: Proportion of social workers with corresponding ethical answer in all of situations in professional responsibility aspect

| Number of corresponding ethical answers | Number of social workers | Percentage |
|---|--------------------------|------------|
| 0 | 10 | 2.5 |
| 1 | 17 | 4.3 |
| 2 | 42 | 10.6 |
| 3 | 36 | 9.1 |
| 4 | 51 | 12.9 |
| 5 | 70 | 17.7 |
| 6 | 52 | 13.1 |
| 7 | 47 | 11.9 |
| 8 | 29 | 7.3 |
| 9 | 22 | 5.6 |
| 10 | 12 | 3.0 |
| 11 | 6 | 1.5 |
| 12 | 2 | 0.5 |

Table 2 shows that, there is no social worker who ethically responded in all 14 situations. In addition, 10 out of 396 people (2.5%) had all answers that were completely unethical.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

From the research results above, we can come to some of the following discussions: The study has described the reality of understanding, ethical behavior of social workers in practice in terms of professional responsibility aspect. In general, the social workers had a relatively limited level of knowledge and ethical behavior. As followed:

Firstly, the results of the study indicate that many social workers were unable to balance their expertise, emotions and health. One third of the respondents admitted that they were not responsible for their work. In fact, the sense of responsibility is one of the fundamental principles at work. If one person is not responsible at work, it means an ethical violation. The “responsibility” is a word which repeated many times in the Code of Ethics in the 10 countries (we have studied) and it is also specified in Circular 01 of the Ministry of Labour - Invalids and Social Affairs in Article 3.4, 4.2, 4.5 and 5.10: “Responsible for professional social work activities, ensuring the clients are provided with appropriate and quality social work services”.

In addition, most social workers did not receive a professional supporter and supervisor in their practice. In fact, in Vietnam, the social work profession has just developed and is gradually moving towards professionalism, and supervision is vital for high quality social work. Moreover, most of the surveyed people are young in terms of age and career, so supervision and professional support are both essential. In the current context of helping professions, there were not many agencies and organizations provide supportive supervision to less-experienced people (Bui Thi Hong Thai, 2016: 295), so many different forms of supervision can be applied to improve quality, such as supervising superiors, counter-monitoring among coworkers, or self-monitoring.

More notably, the majority of social workers still helped clients when they were weak or overloaded with work. This is unethical behavior. According to codes of professional ethics of social workers, such as the NASW Code of Ethics (2017: 21) standard 4.05 [a] and 4.05 [b]; the AASW Code of Ethics (2010: 21) standard 5.1.5; Circular 01 in Article 4.7 pointed out that, social workers should not allow their own personal problems, psychosocial distress, legal problems, substance abuse, or mental health difficulties to interfere with their professional judgment and performance or to jeopardize the best interests of people for whom they have a professional responsibility. Reamer (2013) showed that, in instances where social workers find that their personal difficulties interfere with their professional judgment and performance, they are obligated to seek professional help, make adjustments in their workload, terminate their practice, or take other steps necessary to protect clients and others.

Secondly, the majority of social workers violated principles related to information privacy and informed consent in process of helping clients. They are clearly set in the AASW Code of Ethics in section 5.2.3; KASW Code of Ethics in standards I.2.2 and II.1.5; BASW Code of Ethics in standards 3.3 and 3.4; NASW Code of Ethics in standard 1.03; SASW Code of Ethics in standard A.3; JASW Code of Ethics in standard I.4, I.7 of the JASW; IASW Code of Ethics; and Circular 01 (Articles 5.2 and 5.3).

Thirdly, more than a half of participants admitted that they did not regularly study the materials to improve their professional capacity. This means that they did not comply with the principles of social workers in Vietnam, namely Article 5.8 and 5.9 (Circular 01/2017/TT-BLDTBXH). Regarding this matter, Congress and McAuliffe (2006: 161) also recommend that social workers frequently must revise and update ethical practice standards and codes in accordance with new knowledge and emerging practice issues. Social work must, for example, stay abreast of new developments in technology, and acknowledge the complexity of practice issues in the context of cultural and social diversity.

Fourthly, nearly a half of social workers provided unsuitable services for clients. In other words, they had provided social work services outside the scope of professional education and training. This is unethical behavior. In the codes of ethics also mentioned that social workers should provide services and represent themselves as competent only within the boundaries of their education, training, license, certification, consultation received, supervised experience, or other relevant professional experience. In addition, social workers should provide services in substantive areas or use intervention techniques or approaches that are new to them only after engaging in appropriate study, training, consultation, and supervision from people who are competent in those interventions or techniques (Houston-Vega, Nuehring, & Daguio, 1997; Reamer, 2006; NASW, 2017: 9). Other studies have also shown that ultimately social workers themselves bear the responsibility to maintain expertise and uphold the integrity of the profession. They must never practice outside the area of their competence, engage in dishonesty or fraud, or allow conduct in their personal life to interfere with their professional roles and responsibilities (Thompson, 2014 and Patricia Hocking-Walker, 2015: 12). Therefore, the lack of professional knowledge, or weak awareness/practice will lead to neglect or deviate the goals of the service models in social work moreover it directly affects the rights of the clients (Le Thi Lam & Trinh Thi Nguyet, 2018).

VI. CONCLUSIONS

From a career perspective, it is extremely important and necessary to research the current situation of understanding and behavior of social workers in practice. Among the sample surveyed in this study, the ethical understanding and behavior of social workers in Vietnam in terms of professional responsibility aspect are generally limited. Respondents were almost evenly split in their knowledge and understanding about professional ethics. This result has given an alarming level about the lack of capacities and responsibilities of social workers in practice in Vietnam today. To solve this problem, it is necessary to have more appropriate mechanisms and policies to improve the quality of social work services. Thus, research in the field of the factors that affected professional ethical awareness and behavior of social workers should be extensive.

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