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Factors Influencing Child Protection Competence of Social Workers in Hanoi, Vietnam

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Abstract

The study aims to determine factors influencing child protection competence of social workers in social service institutions providing child protection services in Hanoi, Vietnam and measure the influence of these factors on their child protection competence. A field survey was conducted with 249 social workers who are providing child protection services, using a semi-structured questionnaire as a research instrument to collect data, however, there were 242 social workers were qualified for the participation in the research due to their full filling in the questionnaires. In order to

analyze the data collected, the study used statistical analytic tools such as descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha coefficients and the Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) model. The study identified four factors influencing the CPC of the social workers, including Education and training (G), Working environment (MT), Personal characteristics (CN) and Cultural characteristics (VH). The study also determined to what extent these factors affected the CPC of the social workers.

Keywords: Child Protection, Competence, Social Services, Social Workers

1. Introduction

Child protection competence (CPC) of social workers is significant for the development of quality of child protection services. Child protection social workers are required to be eligible for fulfilling their tasks to ensure the well – being and rights of children ^[1]. In Vietnam, child protection and care has been always given special attention by the government and was the first priority in the social welfare policy of the country ^[2]. Child protection social workers are a key workforce in child protection system and their responsibilities were stipulated by the law on children ^[1]. However, their competence in response to children's problems and needs is still a concern since there are probably not enough professional contacts with children at the institutional level ^[3]. In a recent report by the national hotline, local social workers were not in a good collaboration with them in supporting children and lacked competences in identifying children's problems. Moreover, the number of the local qualified social workers was inadequate for supporting children and families ^[4]. Hanoi is the capital of Vietnam with the total population of children of 1.938.324 out of which there are 14.221 children in special circumstances (poor children, criminal children, children living in families with social problems and etc.), 1.038 children with accidents and injuries, 54 children who died of accidents, including 37 drowned children ^[5]. The access to inappropriate and harmful content, cyber bullying, and exploitation of private information enhance children's vulnerability to risks and harms. The study of UNICEF highlighted that many youngsters now surf the internet with less adult supervision, which could be more risky due to the pervasiveness of mobile devices ^[6]. In order to solve problems related to children, child protection boards were established at 579 communes and towns in Hanoi. The board includes a leader of people's committee, an socio-culture officer in charge of labour-invalids and social affairs, a child protection social worker, a head of a clinic, a police, a head of women's union, youth union and red cross association ^[7]. Since 2021, the city has implemented child protection and care programs between 2021 and 2025 toward 2030. The activities conducted include child protection training; national children data collection and management, support, intervention, education, culture and sports provided to children and families ^[5]. However, a skilled and steady workforce is required to satisfy the needs of children and families ^[8]. The purpose of this study is to explore the factors that influence social workers' CPC and determined to what extent these factors influence their CPC.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Literature Review

The Maine Child Welfare Training Institute (USA) defines competence as "the combination of knowledge, skills, and abilities to perform the job tasks" [9]. Another study found that an individual who possesses the requisite knowledge, abilities, and attitude can be classified as competent in their particular profession [10]. The key child protection competencies highlight the specialized skills, behaviors, and knowledge areas required for child protection practitioners to execute regardless of the individual child protection program and situation [11]. There are many factors influencing social workers' child protection competence. Several countries have had problems with child protection services. These problems include too much paperwork, which decreased social workers' competence to help children and families directly. The workload for social workers has also increased, and they often feel a lot of pressure at work [12]. Social workers have so much paperwork to do that they only have one hour each day to speak with children or their parents who need help [13]. Direct contact, therefore, is a significant component for successful child and family social work [14]. Regular maintenance or unexpected issues with networks could limit the ability to use electronic recording systems. Information technology problems could potentially lead to delays in obtaining information and reviewing child records, which is especially worrisome during urgent situations such as family crises or emergencies [15]. Education and training is regarded as a factor influencing an individual's competence. According to Nga. N. T (2019), educational renovation should be based on learners' competence and this is also an urgent need of universities in Vietnam [16]. The study by Alainati *et al* determined several factors, including training, education, personality personal characteristics and culture, influence knowledge management and individuals' qualifications and degrees, which impact how they receive knowledge and each individual interprets knowledge differently based on their background and/or work environment [17]. A study by Nguyen *et al.* (2017) also showed personal characteristics influencing an individual's creative competence include "Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, Extroversion, Openness to experience and Emotional stability" [18]. According to Hoa. P (2018), In order to develop an individual's competence, it is necessary to have three factors, including knowledge, emotion and social context [19].

2.2 Theoretical Framework

The study applied the Ecological Theory of Urie Bronfenbrenner as its theoretical framework. This theory advocates a relationship between humans and their environment that can influence their behavior in various ways. The theory states that environments affects human behaviors and development and vice versa. The exploration of the four factors influencing the social workers' child protection competence (CPC) was determined through Micro, Meso, Exo and Macro systems in the theory. The microsystem represents the relationships between an individual and his/her surrounding environment, whereas the mesosystem indicates the interactions between the different microsystems in the context of an individual's life. The exosystem plays a significant role in influencing an individual's development in indirect ways and the

macrosystem includes cultural, societal, and ideological factors that influence how a person grows and changes over time [20]. The Exploratory Factor Analysis model is properly defined to explain data. EFA relies heavily on determining the appropriate amount of such components. When EFA identifies common factors, it sees them as combinations of the original variables. Their coefficients are called loadings, and their magnitudes are used to understand the factors [21].

3. Methodology

The study found four factors that have an impact on the participants' CPC. The factors were identified through survey questionnaires that were filled out by 249 social workers who are working at four social service institutions in Hanoi, Vietnam. After reviewing the information collected, 7 questionnaires were removed from the study because the respondents did not provide enough data. There were 242 questionnaires left. The study identified variables based on previous empirical research and comments from two experts in competence and child protection from the University of Labour and Social Affairs and Department of Children (Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs). The influence degrees of the factors were measured by a 5 point-Likert scale from "1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree" and mean values. The data was computed and analyzed by a SPSS program, version 20.

4. Research Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 1: Demographic Information of the participants

Items	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	33	13.6
Female	209	86.4
Social work education		
SW Vocational training Certificates	18	7.4
SW Bachelor's Degrees	189	78.1
SW Master's Degrees	35	14.5

Table 1 displays the participants' demographic information. The gender is imbalance with the majority of females (86.4%) as compared to the rate of males (13.6%). The gender ratio is skewed, with the majority of females (86.4%) outnumbering males (13.6%). Majority of the participants (78.1%) have Bachelor's degrees in Social Work and Social work Masters' degrees (14.5%), while just a small percentage of the participants have Social Work vocational training certificates (7.4%). According to the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, social workers who do not hold a Social work Bachelor's degree must obtain Social work vocational training certificates in order to be qualified for the social work profession [22].

4.2 Exploratory Factor Analysis

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was used to find four influencing factors and related variables. The four factors include Education and training (G), Working environment (MT), Personal characteristics (CN), Cultural characteristics (VH) with 20 items. In order to ensure the data fit the EFA model, Kaiser-Mayer-Olkin (KMO) test and Bartlett's test were conducted. The KMO value was $0.6 < 0.79 < 1$ and Bartlett's test was significant ($p=0.00 < 0.01$), which indicates the data was suitable for conducting the EFA.

Factor loadings > 0.5 indicate that variables are statistically well significant. All the factors have Eigenvalues > 1 and

coefficients of Cronbach's Alpha > 0.6 [23]. The four-factor structure, therefore, fit the data reasonably well.

Table 2: Rotated Component Matrix^a

		Component			
		1	2	3	4
MT2	Workloads	.760			
MT3	Administrative work	.686			
MT5	Monthly income	.651			
MT6	Work pressure and stress	.609			
MT1	Training policy	.603			
MT4	Technical difficulties	.578			
VH4	Social culture		.805		
VH3	On-the-job environmental culture		.787		
VH2	Community culture		.704		
VH1	Children's family culture		.692		
CN4	Personality			.798	
CN5	Social work practice experience			.720	
CN2	Individual's behavior			.620	
CN3	Working experience in Child protection			.502	
G3	Child protection practice training				.736
G1	Social work practice training				.720
G4	Child protection education				.699
G2	Social work education				.539
		Eigenvalue = 4.26	Eigenvalue = 2.36	Eigenvalue = 1.67	Eigenvalue = 1.31
		Cronbach's Alpha = 0.76	Cronbach's Alpha = 0.71	Cronbach's Alpha = 0.73	Cronbach's Alpha = 0.68

The result shows that four factors were extracted with 18 items. Variables that have factor loadings < 0.5 are not statistically significant [24], therefore, after conducting EFA, two items G5 (Child protection courses), CN1 (Peer support) were removed.

VH4 (Social culture) has the greatest impact on their CPC (M=3.88). A sizable portion of participants (73%) placed their opinions in the middle of the Likert scale, with VH1 (Children's family culture) having the least impact on their CPC. VH2, VH3 appeared to be comparable with their respective mean values of 3.49 and 3.77.

Table 3: The influence of MT on the participants' CPC

	1	2	3	4	5	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Percentage							
MT1	0.4	0.8	18.2	64.5	16.1	3.95	0.64
MT2	0	1.7	6.2	70.2	21.9	4.12	0.58
MT3	0	5.0	21.9	64.5	8.6	3.76	0.67
MT4	0	6.6	24.8	58.3	10.3	3.72	0.73
MT5	0.8	7.4	26.9	53.7	11.2	3.67	0.80
MT6	3.3	6.6	20.3	53.7	16.1	3.73	0.92

1=strongly disagree, 2 =disagree, 3 = neutral, 4=agree and 5 = strongly agree

Table 3 shows the influence of working environment on the participants' CPC. The majority of participants agreed that MT2 (Workload), with a Mean value of 4.12, has the strongest impact on their CPC. The remaining items, including MT1, MT3, MT4, MT5, and M6, seemed to be similar, with mean values ranging from 3.67 to 3.95.

Table 4: The influence of VH on the participants' CPC

	1	2	3	4	5	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Percentage							
VH1	0.4	9.9	74.0	15.7	0	3.04	0.52
VH2	0	1.2	47.9	50.9	0	3.49	0.52
VH3	0	0.4	23.1	75.6	0.9	3.77	0.45
VH4	0	11.2	14.6	49.6	24.8	3.88	0.91

1=strongly disagree, 2 =disagree, 3 = neutral, 4=agree and 5 = strongly agree

Table 4 shows the influence of cultural characteristics on the participants' CPC. Majority of the participants agreed that

Table 5: The influence of CN on the participants' CPC

	1	2	3	4	5	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Percentage							
CN2	0.4	5.0	21.9	62.0	10.7	3.77	0.72
CN3	0	2.9	19.9	63.6	13.6	3.88	0.66
CN4	1.2	6.6	22.3	61.6	8.3	3.69	0.77
CN5	1.2	6.2	20.3	60.3	12.0	3.75	0.79

1=strongly disagree, 2 =disagree, 3 = neutral, 4=agree and 5 = strongly agree

Majority of the participants agreed that all of the CN2, CN3, CN4, CN5 had an effect on their CPC, but CN3 (Working experience in child protection) had the strongest impact, with a mean value of 3.88.

Table 6: The influence of G on the participants' CPC

	1	2	3	4	5	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Percentage							
G1	0	3.3	25.6	59.1	12.0	3.79	0.68
G2	2.1	12.8	25.6	54.1	5.4	3.48	0.86
G3	0.4	9.5	26.4	54.5	9.1	3.62	0.80
G4	1.2	6.2	29.8	56.6	6.2	3.60	0.75

1=strongly disagree, 2 =disagree, 3 = neutral, 4=agree and 5 = strongly agree

Table 6 displays the impact of training and education on participants' CPC. The majority of participants agreed that each of the groups G1, G2, G3, and G4 had an impact on their CPC, but G1 (social work practice training) had the strongest influence, with a mean value of 3.79.

5. Discussion and Implications

The study identified the four factors that affected the participants' CPC and the degree to which those factors affected their CPC. The four factors were identified based on the ecological theory of Bronfenbrenner, including MT (Working environment), VH (Cultural characteristics), (CN) Personal characteristics and (G) Education and training. All the participants were qualified with their role as social workers^[22]. The EFA model identified four factors with 18 variables grouped together after crossing over two variables that were not statistically significant. The variables' analysis provided proof of the reliability and validity of the influencing factors. Utilizing Cronbach's Alpha coefficients, the scales were used with accuracy and internal consistency. All of the factors influenced the participants' CPC to varying degrees.

The working environment, which included Training policy (MT1), Workload (M2), Administrative work (MT3), Technical difficulties (MT4), Monthly income (MT5), Work pressure and stress (MT6), influenced the CPC, but Workload was the most influencing element, with a mean value of 4.12. The result is similar to the finding of the research by Herbert. I (2004), which found "the true scale of the workload facing social workers"^[13].

Other Cultural characteristics, such as Children's family culture (VH1), Community culture (VH2), On-the-job environmental culture (VH3), and Social culture (VH4), had an impact on the CPC, but Social culture had the greatest influence, with a mean value of 3.88. It is significant because an individual's culture and beliefs influence how they receive and share knowledge^[17].

Alainati *et al.* (2011) identified three elements of Personal characteristics including "intention, autonomy and fluctuation" that influenced individual's behaviour such as developing, sharing and innovating knowledge^[17]. Different from the research by Alainati, this study determined elements of personal characteristics, including Individual's behavior (CN2), Working experience in child protection (CN3), Personality (CN4) and Social work practice experience (CN5) with the strong influencing element of Working experience in child protection (M=3.88).

Another factor that influenced individual competence is *Education and training*. A study proved that the two important factors affected individual competences, however, it mainly focus on discussing education as the theoretical foundation of knowledge that an individual needs to build organizational knowledge.

Education and training is another factor that influenced the participants' CPC. Another study discovered education was a major factor influenced individual competences however, the study primarily focused on analyzing this factor as the theoretical foundation of knowledge necessary to build organizational knowledge. Similarly, training was important because it was regarded as one of the necessary skills to carry out a task^[25]. The current study also identified Education and training as a factor influencing CPC, but the factor had several components, including Social work practice training (G1), Social work education (G2), Child protection practice training (G3), and Child protection education (G4). The majority of participants agreed that social work practice training was the most influential factor on their CPC (M=3.79).

6. Conclusion

The study identified four factors that influenced the participants' CPC, including working environment (MT), cultural characteristics (VH), personal characteristics (CN), and education and training (G), which included 18 items and the degrees of influence of these factors on the participants' CPC. Descriptive statistics were performed on the participants' demographic information and a Likert scale and mean values were used to determine the degree of influence of the factors on their CPC. The EFA model was used to examine the study's instrument, and all of the data fit the factor structure.

The findings revealed four factors influencing the participants' CPC, with workload, social culture, working experience in child protection, and social work practice training being the most influential. The study did not investigate whether these factors had a negative or positive influence on the participants' CPC, so our future research will be conducted to determine whether these factors have a negative or positive influence on the CPC of social workers.

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