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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

#### THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WELL-BEING AT WORK AND THE PROFESSIONAL ETHICS OF SOCIAL WORKERS

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#### Abstract

The purpose of this article explores the relationship between well-being at work and the professional ethics of social workers. The study used descriptive data collection methods. The participants of this research were 396 social workers (female = 276, male = 120) has been working in hospitals, social work service centers, childcare education centers in Hanoi, ThanhHoa and QuangNinh. The study used two Scales to collect data: (i) a design scale of professional ethics shows through five aspects (professional responsibility, confidentiality, relationship with client, relationship with colleagues and relationship with organization, society); (ii) Well-being at work Scale of Paschoal and Tamayo (2008). Data were analyzed by correlation and regression calculations. The research results show that the more social worker follow the professional ethics in all 5 aspects, the higher positive emotions and sense of accomplishment score and the lower negative emotions score.

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#### Introduction:-

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.

Up to now, the social workers officials and collaborators have been still thin and have not been trained professionally. Most are trained from other professions or a few are not even trained professionally (Ministry of Labour - Invalids and Social Affairs, 2017b). When we observed the reality at internship sessions for students majoring in social work, we found that besides the ethical behaviors of employees were performing very well such as respect the clients, acceptance clients,...., there are many other violations of professional ethics that have happened, such as disclosing personal information, sharing photos of objects on social networking sites,.... The phenomenon shows that professional ethics is really a matter of concern and should be oriented for organizations, service providers in the practice process.

Around the world, there were many studies done on the ethical issues of social workers in practice. Those studies were mentioned mainly about general ethical violations of social workers, violations of dual relationships, violations of information security and poor capacity in practising. Ethics in social work and their performance in professional

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activities are rarely analyzed in scientific publications (Irena Leliūgienė, Violeta Andrijevska, 2016: 19). In Vietnam, there have not many researches been published in the field of professional ethics of social workers.

### **Literature Review:-**

Despite of efforts to find studies on the relationship between the ethical behavior of social workers and well-being at work, we do not find much researches which supportive this argument. The goal of this study is to fill this gap by looking at understanding and ethical behaviour in practice as a potential variable that can link ethical behavior with the well-being at work of social workers. From the employee perspective, Meijman and Mulder (1998) argued that unhappiness or negative feelings at work were causes of low productivity. The authors explained that when the employees were not happy, they performed their task under the expected threshold or they only completed a part of expected task. On the other hand, when the employees felt happy, they would devoted their efforts to work and regained energy for themselves after finishing their tasks. This lead to their higher performance. Looking at research of Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2003: 86) we found that one of the personal factors that could affect the ethical decision-making of a job was mental status. Kalshoven & Boon (2012) and Yang (2014) identified, the ethical behavior of leaders had an impact on employees' well-being at work. The ethical leaders would have positively affects the job satisfaction of subordinates; it also reduced deviation and unethical behavior of their employees (Trevino et al., 2013). The ethical behavior of supervisors can also influence the positive or negative actions of subordinates, because supervisors have significant control over their subordinates and have a great impact on their work needs and social support (eg, Gilbreath & Benson, 2004; Harris & Kacmar, 2006; Liu et al., 2010). Previous research by Chughtai et al. (2015) examined specifically the link between ethical leadership and the two types of employee happiness, job engagement and burnout about their feelings.

### **Methodology:-**

#### **Objects**

We sent 500 questionnaires to social workers who have 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 ranged 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 are at intermediate level, 79.3% of the objects are at College and University degrees, and 10.35% of the subjects have master and doctor degrees. Regarding work experiences, 8.6% of objects have been working for less than 1 year, 31.3% of objects have been working from 1 to less than 3 years, 16.9% of objects have been working from 3 to less than 5 years, 26, 5% of objects have been working from 5 to less than 10 years and 16.7% of objects have been working over 10 years.

#### **Research tools**

Besides, the social demographic information as described above, the research surveyed the objects through 2 scales:

- The scale of professional ethics of social workers shows through 05 ethical aspects: (i) Professional responsibility; (ii) confidentiality of information, (iii) relationships with clients, (iv) relationships with colleagues, and (v) relationships with organizations and society. Based on the analysis of 10 codes of professional ethics of social workers of 10 countries around the world, 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 2, 2017). The author built 81 ethical situations in helping people with special circumstances in Vietnam today.
- The Scale of Well-being at Work is developed by Paschoal and Tamayo (2008). The scale has been used on young Vietnamese employees in the study of Bui Thi Hong Thai, Nguyen Thi Nhu Trang and Tran Thi Minh Duc (2020) and reports good reliability with Cronbach's alpha value = 0.91. The scale consists of 29 clauses, assigned scores from 1 - disagree to 4 - agree totally. The 29 propositions are grouped into 3 aspects: positive emotion, negative feeling and sense of accomplishment. The higher the score, the more relevant the emotional state is, and vice versa.

#### **Data analysis**

The data in this study was analyzed by SPSS software version 23.0. The descriptive data on the target group are social workers represented through correlation analysis and regression analysis. Hypotheses are tested by analyzing the correlation between the variables expressed in Pearson r value and regression (Based on the parameters R<sup>2</sup>, F-test, Beta coefficient and p < 0.05).

## Results:-

In this study, we are interested in whether feeling happy at work affects the professional ethics of the social workers or not.

Table 1 shows that the initial results of the research on the relationship between cognitive aspects/professional ethical behavior with the subject's well-being at work. The results indicate that all five aspects of professional ethics are correlated with three aspects of well-being at work. It means that the more social worker follow the professional ethics in all 5 aspects, the higher positive emotions and sense of accomplishment score and the lower negative emotions score. In other words, understanding and complying with the professional ethics of a social workers can make the research subjects happier with their work.

**Table 1:-** Relationship between professional ethics aspects and well-being at work.

Variables	Professional responsibility	Confidentiality of information	Relationships with clients	Relationships with colleagues	Relationships with organizations and society
Positive emotions	0,346***	0,243***	0,125***	0,322***	0,510***
Negative emotions	-0,259***	-0,184***	-0,494***	-0,452***	-0,382***
Sense of accomplishment	0,425***	0,291***	0,139***	0,329***	0,440***

Based on the results above, the next section will present the effect of professional ethics to the well-being at work of the objects.

In Table 2, the results show the impact of the implementation of the ethical professional behavior to the well-being at work of social workers.

**Table 2:-** Multiple regression of ethical professional behavior to well-being at work.

	a. Positive emotions			b. Negative emotions			c. Sense of accomplishment		
	B	SE	Beta	B	SE	Beta	B	SE	Beta
Professional responsibility	0,25	0,10	0,13*	-0,08	0,12	-0,04	0,57	0,11	<b>0,27***</b>
Confidentiality of information	0,07	0,13	0,03	0,38	0,14	0,14**	0,21	0,14	0,08
Relationships with clients	-0,23	0,05	-0,27***	-0,32	0,06	<b>-0,35***</b>	-0,22	0,05	<b>-0,26***</b>
Relationships with colleagues	0,27	0,11	0,17*	-0,33	0,12	-0,18**	0,33	0,11	0,19**
Relationships with organizations and society	0,87	0,11	<b>0,46***</b>	-0,31	0,13	-0,15*	0,54	0,12	<b>0,27***</b>
R <sup>2</sup> corrected	<b>0,297</b>			<b>0,284</b>			<b>0,274</b>		

In positive emotions aspect, the figures in Table a show that a combination of the 5 ethical dimensions can account for the change of 29.7% in the positive emotions score at work of the subjects. Of these, the security of information aspect does not participate in the change of positive feelings at work in a meaningful way. Compliance with the professional ethics of the relationship with the client reduces the score of positive feelings at work (Beta = -0.27) while the increase of three dimensions increases the positive emotions scores. The results also noted that the compliance with professional ethics in the "responsibility with organizations and society" aspect plays the most important role in predicting positive emotions at work of social workers. (Beta = 0.46). This result shows that, in order to increase the well-being, excitement and happiness at work of social workers, it is important to promote appropriate professional ethics behavior.

In negative emotions aspect, the data in Table b shows that the combination of five ethical dimensions can predict a downward change of 28.4% in negative emotions at work. Of these, in the aspect of the relationship with the client plays the most important role in the change of negative emotions at work (Beta = -0.35).

Finally, in the sense of accomplishment aspect on the job, Table c shows that the combination of five ethical dimensions accounts for 27.4% of the change in the sense of accomplishment. The role of each ethical aspect is almost equal (except for the information security aspect) in predicting the sense of accomplishment at work.

To summarize, there are a few points that can be drawn from the results above:

1. The compliance with professional ethics regulations can increase well-being at work of social workers.
2. The information security aspect does not participate in the forecast for well-being at work of social workers.
3. The “responsibility with organizations and society” aspect seems to play the most important role in affecting the feeling of happiness of social workers.

### **Recommendations:-**

From the research results above, we can give some of the following discussions:

First, all five aspects of professional ethics are correlated with three aspects of well-being at work.

This finding is consistent in research results of Xanthopoulou et al (2012: 510). These authors stated that positive emotions and positive belief in oneself affected well performance at work and contributed to increased resilience in the face of stress and exhaustion at work. From there, it would increase a sense of attachment to the organization, stimulate passion for the job and limited mistakes in the working process of people. The results of this study are consistent with the studies in predicting positive emotions at work of the survey objects and also reinforce the assumption that, understanding and ethical behavior in practice are considered as a potential variable that can link ethical behavior with the well-being at work of social workers.

Second, the above phenomena shows that professional ethics is really a matter of concern and needs to be oriented for organizations, service providers in the practice process. To limit ethics violations, agencies and organizations which providing social work services should have solutions to improve the employee's satisfaction at work. In addition, agencies should also focus on providing ethics education programme effectively for employees. On the other hand, social workers should have a positive attitude and spirit in their work. At the same time, they should learn knowledge and skills by themselves, especially ethical principles knowledge, as well as skills in making ethical decisions which are suitable with the changes of law, practice and needs of society.

### **Conclusions:-**

In summary, the results above confirm the role of psychological factor of social workers in practising professional ethics. Research results have shown a propitious relationship between knowledge and ethical practices in five ethical aspects with the well-being at work of social workers. At the same time, they also show the importance of understanding and implementing ethical behavior with positive emotions at work. The more social workers experience ethical behaviors, the more positive emotions and feelings of accomplishment at work increase. This result has both contributed to promote and reaffirm the results of some previous researches. It also adds new points to the cognitive and ethical behavior aspects in process of helping people with special circumstances of social workers. This is a basis for further research to explore the predictability of factors to change in social work practice activities.

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