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RESEARCH ARTICLE

DEVIANT BEHAVIORS IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION MODELS

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Abstract

A large percentage of college students with deviant behaviors, especially concerning learning and social relations has been reported by many studies. This article reviewed the current situation of deviant behaviors among college students through studies conducted in Vietnam and the world, including common behavioral patterns and their prevalence. In addition, the article pointed out certain factors affecting students' deviant behaviors, including the motivating factors as well as the inhibiting factors through the 'reward and cost' mechanism, the learning mechanism, and learning engagement. Amid such situation, the article also introduced some direct and indirect prevention and intervention models for students' deviant behaviors through learning from the experience of universities around the world, selecting those feasible and highly applicable to the Vietnamese environment.

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Introduction:-

Deviant behaviors among young people have tended to increase in recent years (Nguyen Duy Hiep, 2016). According to the report by the Ministry of Public Security at the Conference summing up the fight against all kinds of crimes related to children and families, the situation of crime and law violations by teenagers continues to evolve complexly with an increasingly dangerous and serious nature, extent and consequences. It becomes especially serious in big cities such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City

Statistics of the authorities have shown that young criminals are often school dropouts. Specifically, according to the statistics of Ho Chi Minh City's Public Security on juvenile delinquency in the period 2018 to the end of the first quarter of 2021, 71.44% of young violators dropped out of school. As such, schooling has great significance in curbing deviant behaviors in general and law violations in particular.

What is deviance? This concept means, in a broad sense, a violation of social norms including legal norms. The degrees of deviance can vary widely. According to the classification by John Hagan (1994), deviance can stem from social differences, which involves violations of insignificant norms, with few consequences on others and the community and, therefore, without formal punishments, but often with certain reproach responses such as eyebrow-raising or ridicule, to social deviance, which represents violations of relatively significant norms and, thus, is generally considered harmful to the community and subsequently subject to institutional punishments. The highest degree of deviance is a violation of criminal law and is classified as a crime.

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This article provided an insight into deviance among college students, with three main contents: the current situation of the problem through reviewing the existing literature; explanations for students' deviant behaviors; and some prevention and intervention models to eliminate deviant behaviors among college students.

Current situation

Deviance among young people is conventionally believed to be manifested in the following four aspects: (1) hedonistic and non-disciplinary lifestyle; (2) impulsive, violent and disrespectful behaviors; (3) emotionless; and (4) non-selective absorption of foreign cultures (Pham Hong Tung, 2011). Meanwhile, some later studies show that today's youth often have some specific deviant behavioral patterns, most prominently, committing social evils such as prostitution and substance and drug abuse. However, studies on students in the school setting mainly focus on deviant behavioral patterns related to learning, then manners and social relations. The study by Mai Thi Ngoc Bich (2017) reports that up to 22.8% of students think cheating in learning is acceptable, 17.7% are ready to offer and give gifts to achieve their goals, and 28.7% accept doing everything, including cheating to be successful.

According to the 2010 Global Adult Tobacco Survey (GATS) jointly conducted in Vietnam by United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Hanoi Medical University, 13.5% of the age group 15-24 smoke, and 26.1% of which are males. An estimated 15.3 million Vietnamese adults (comprising 14.8 million males and 477,000 females) are smokers (Nguyen Thi Chinh, 2012).

The percentage of premarital sexual practice among young people has increased from 7.6 to 9.5% in just 5 years. According to data from the website of the Ministry of Health, Vietnam is one of the countries with the highest abortion rate in the world, with an average of 20-30 cases per day, 30-40% of which are students.

An investigation into the prevalence of behaviors among young people in Thai Nguyen by Mai Thi Ngoc Bich (2017) reveals that traffic violations account for the highest percentage (40.5%), followed by playing the lottery and betting (40%), gambling for money (28.1%), substance abuse (16.4%), aggression and violence (19.5%), theft (27%), and finally prostitution (11.9%). It also indicates that the abuse of games is quite common among students, with 32.5% of respondents saying they often play games in their free time.

Is this situation of deviance among students acceptable? It is noteworthy that studies on deviant behaviors among college students in other countries also indicate a rather high rate of deviant behaviors. The self-report rates for school deviant behaviors among students in the US, the UK, Australia, China, Ireland, and Japan are respectively 62%, 40%, 57%, 71%, 51%, and 72% (Bernardi and Adamaitis, 2006). In reference to regulations of universities in advanced countries worldwide, it is uncovered that deviant behavioral patterns among college students are usually classified into three groups as follows: (1) general misconducts such as quarrel, harassment, insult, intimidation (2) Academic deviance such as behaviors intended to gain an unfair advantage in the course for oneself or another person, such as cheating, truancy/absence from school, plagiarism, and (3) research deviance including misconducts in proposing and conducting research and writing reports. An international study on the most common deviant behaviors among students in the academic and international research field reports that 75% of students admit to having committed academic cheating (Sistrunk, Betty Diane Baugh, 1997). A recent study by Cooper & Klein (2018) has found that substance abuse is the most common in universities (40.7%), followed by improper parking (37.2%), academic cheating (22.5%), lying for truancy (25.3%), and stealing textbooks from classmates (17.5%).

Yet, the literature review also reveals a gap in terms of serious deviant or even criminal behavior among college students. This is partly because students, unlike high school pupils, are adults and are eligible to take full responsibility for their actions to the law. Therefore, studies on students' deviant behaviors often concentrate solely on the academic field rather than other behavioral patterns which are often examined from a citizen aspect. In addition, it is difficult to approach adults to learn about their deviant and criminal behaviors. Most studies, including international ones, often rely on official data released by public agencies rather than self-survey and collection.

Factors affecting deviant behaviors among college students

As adults, students' deviant behaviors are generally theoretically explained based on intrinsic factors, such as the 'reward-cost' approach. This approach is based on the argument that humans are rational entities, and therefore, we often consider our behavior in such a way that it maximizes the benefits and minimizes the risks. Whether students engage in deviant behaviors is highly dependent on how they calculate the "costs" (the risks they incur if they engage in such behavior) versus the 'rewards' (the benefits they receive if the behavior is performed). As an

example, everyone wants to get a good result with no effort, but whether a student cheats in the exam room or not depends on weighing the pros and cons between the risk of getting caught and disciplinary consequences and the benefit of getting good results with no effort. In environments where discipline is strict and fair and cheating students are possibly subject to examination suspension, students will rarely commit cheating because the risk is simply too great for the reward from such behavior.

Another theory is also very often used to explain deviant behaviors among students, which is the social learning theory. It is based on the assumption that deviant behaviors were not naturally born, but are often learned and absorbed from those around us, especially those close to us. The learning mechanism may vary. First, frequent observation and exposure to other people's deviant behaviors will make us feel that they are normal and acceptable. Next, having relationships with people with deviant behaviors allows us to learn how to do such behaviors. The learning process often goes through many trials, failures, then repeated trials before success. It is the encouragement and guidance of acquaintances that significantly motivate students to engage in deviant behaviors. It is common for a student to fail for the first time cheating, but if he makes friends with cheaters who will give him instructions and encouragement on cheating, he will keep learning this behavioral pattern.

The deviant behaviors among college students are also commonly justified using the attachment theory. While most theories of deviance ask why people deviate/break the law, the social bonding theory raises the opposite question: Why not? Obviously, it is faster and easier for people to achieve their goals by means of violations in many situations. Bribery will help you get promoted faster than hard work. Cheating will bring about a high score with no or less effort. So why don't humans commit deviant behaviors? The bond to mainstream society will prevent individuals from deviant behaviors as they will not desire to damage their position in mainstream society. Consider the case where I like good grades and, of course, I also like to get good grades with no effort. However, I will not cheat because it will cause me to face disciplinary actions, my parents will be ashamed of me, teachers and friends will be disappointed in me, people will laugh at me, and I will lose the respect of the people with whom I am attached. Thus, as long as I am attached to mainstream society – my family, my friends, and my school, I will strive to limit my deviant behaviors to protect my cherished bonds. To sum up, from the viewpoint of this theory, the bond to mainstream society (school, family, career, etc.) is an effective barrier to deviant behaviors. In contrast, weak bonds to the mainstream society where norms, values, and beliefs are communicated and practiced will release humans from the influence of norms and allow them the freedom to commit violations.

So, what is the social bond? According to Travis Hirschi (1969), the social bond has four elements: attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief.

Attachment: the emotional dimension of the social bond. According to Hirschi, attachment is the core motivation that makes individuals willing to learn norms and build collective consciousness. Without attachment, individuals will easily break down moral barriers, and thus, are prone to behave deviantly.

Commitment refers to the extent to which individuals spend their time and effort in the social institutions of which they are members. Hirschi supposes that the higher an individual has a high degree of commitment to mainstream society, the more cautiously they will avoid deviant behaviors as they will not want to risk the things they have invested heavily in.

Involvement refers to the extent to which individuals spend time on formal activities. Involvement can help limit the possibility of deviance simply because we are too busy with legal activities to commit illegal activities. For instance, when students are busy doing homework, going to the library to read books, participating in volunteer activities, helping their parents with housework, etc., they will have no time left for hanging out with bad friends, racing or playing online games.

Belief in mainstream society is the fourth element of the social bond. Yet, Hirschi argues that this element works if and only if individuals have an attachment, commitment, and involvement in mainstream society.

In a reciprocal relationship, these elements constitute a social bond, preventing individuals from violating the social standards and regulations. Hence, 'deviant behavior occurs once an individual's social bond is weak or broken' (Hirschi 1969:312). According to T. Hirschi, the social bond is a barrier to deviant behavior;

yet, how well an individual is controlled depends on the internalization of social norms, values, and beliefs in that individual, and to what extent he is involved in mainstream social activities and pursues socially recognized goals.

Basically, empirical studies relatively support the perspectives of the foregoing theories. The study by Cooper & Klein (2018) evidences that the learning mechanism has the strongest impact on reducing students' deviant behavior. This study also highlights the positive influence of peer groups on promoting compliance and reducing deviant behavior. Some other studies show that learning engagement is a decisive factor in the outcome quality and the success of the training process (Boulton, Hughes, Kent, Smith & Williams, 2019; Hart, Stewart & Jimerson, 2011). With learning engagement, students will pay more time and attention to academic, professional, and extracurricular activities, thereby, developing mechanisms to help them maintain and regulate their own learning process. It is scientifically evidenced that learning engagement results in higher satisfaction and self-confidence and less risk of failures and dropouts. Significantly, learning engagement is a multidimensional ability that can be learned, developed, and improved over time (Assunção et al., 2020). This explains why creating an environment that promotes learning engagement has remained a concern for many years in the higher education sector (Bowden, Tickle & Naumann, 2019). The role of learning engagement as a key to solving such problems as poor academic performance, academic boredom, and dropout is shared among higher educators, researchers, and policy planners (Fredericks & McColskey, 2012). Most studies agree that severe punishment is not as important as learning motivation in reducing students' deviant behaviors in universities.

In addition, some studies also indicate that students' little understanding of ethical rules in university study/research and codes of conduct/discipline significantly contributes to their high possibility of involving in unintentional deviant behavior (Howard and Davies, 2009). Moreover, teachers' clear instructions about their learning expectations are the most effective in raising students' awareness of the severity of deviant behaviors, thereby reducing deviant behaviors (Sistrunk, 1997).

Some prevention and intervention models

There is a pretty diverse and complicated mechanism to control students' deviant behaviors in Vietnamese universities. Upon admission to school, students are provided with learning rules and subject to inspections by a specialized department to promote compliance and reduce school discipline violations. Further, the Student Affairs and Politics Department will support students with other issues to enable them to learn in the most favorable environment. Some universities such as VNU Hanoi University of Social Sciences and Humanities (VNU Hanoi-USSH) also get feedback from students, on a regular basis, to learn about their learning experiences at the university and early detect difficulties/problems for appropriate interventions. This works so well to prevent and reduce deviant behaviors among students in the university. Another productive initiative of VNU Hanoi-USSH is the establishment of the Student Counseling Department, which provides psychological and social support to disadvantaged students.

In addition to the existing models and solutions adopted in universities in Vietnam, this article also mentioned some international experience in preventing and intervening with students' deviant behaviors. The models can be divided into 2 groups: direct intervention and indirect intervention.

Direct prevention and intervention models

Psychological counseling and intervention:

Based on the fact that some people may commit antisocial behaviors (aggression against others, destruction of public property, etc.) or self-harm (substance abuse, intention to commit suicide, etc.) due to the instability in thinking, feeling and behavior, many universities have set up psychological counseling or school social work departments to support students facing difficulties/negative experiences that may possibly promote deviant behaviors.

Workshops and training:

These activities aim at communicating important school rules, especially those related to academic and research matters to all students. At Monash University, for example, all students must pass a course on Scientific Integrity with an overall score of 80% or higher to begin their programs.

Self-help resources:

Universities provide instructional materials and videos on their website to assist students in improving their self-help skills and strengthen students' ability to manage emotional, cognitive and behavioral problems to reduce stress and

deviance. Instructional materials may comprise lessons on managing emotions, identifying and releasing stress, communication skills, and many more.

Connecting/redirecting cases to specialized support services:

For cases of serious deviant behaviors, beyond the universities' ability to intervene and support, the School Social Work Department will connect/redirect such cases to specialized support services such as psychotherapy or psychiatric services.

Indirect prevention and intervention models

Building a scientific integrity environment/culture:

Stemming from the theory of learning and the fact that the majority of students' deviant behaviors at school are related to academic and research fields, universities have currently attached great significance to building a school environment and culture that upholds scientific integrity. Disciplinary actions are strongly imposed on violations of scientific integrity by both teachers and students. At the same time, faculties or smaller universities often have Ethics Committees, which review the ethical and scientific integrity aspects of research projects. In a qualifying examination, Ph.D. students are usually required to submit an ethics document to the Ethics Committee and conduct their research only with the consent of both committees (Professional Committee and Ethics Committee).

Promoting learning motivations:

This is also one of the very popular methods in universities around the world to indirectly prevent students' deviant behaviors. Methods of promoting learning motivations at the higher education level are slightly different from those in high school because higher education represents vocational education. Thus, methods of promoting student learning motivations often contain a career-job connection, such as sending students for internships; holding annual job fairs with the involvement of many recruiters. Besides, innovating teaching methods and strengthening international cooperation to enhance students' experiences, among others, are also effective in promoting learning motivations.

Conclusion:-

Despite being less severe than deviance among high school pupils, college students' deviant behaviors, especially in matters related to learning and social relations, have been shown by studies to occur in a not small proportion. The 'reward and cost' mechanism, learning mechanism, and learning engagement are significant factors influencing students' behaviors. Amid this situation, the article also recommended some models of prevention and intervention with students' deviance by reference to the experience of universities around the world and selected models with high feasibility and applicability to the Vietnamese environment.

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