

Measuring Vietnamese social work students' and non-social work students' attitudes toward poverty and poor population

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Research Article

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Abstract

The paper reports the results collected from social work students (SW) and nonsocial work students (NSW) of Ho Chi Minh City Open University (OU) through attitudes toward poverty and poor people in Vietnam. The Attitude toward Poverty Short Form (ATP-SF) 21-item (ATP-SF) scale, developed by Yun & Weaver (2010), was used for the data collection. The sample of this study comprises 180 students enrolled in three disciplines: social work (n = 86), law (n = 34), foreign language (n = 30) and economics (n = 30). The questionnaire was used to collect the data for the study. Cronbach's alpha and independent t-tests were run to compare means between two groups of students. All students voluntarily participated in the survey.

Results: A total of 180 social work students and nonsocial work students at Ho Chi Minh City Open University in Vietnam were surveyed. Among them, 86 were social work students, and the other 94 students were from law (n = 34), foreign language (n = 30) and economics (n = 30). The survey results showed that when looking for causes of poverty, social work students and nonsocial work students put the most emphasis on structural factors of poverty. However, social work students, compared with nonsocial work students, consider personal deficiency and stigma more important.

Introduction

Through the past few decades, Vietnam has experienced fundamental economic, political, and social changes. On the one hand, Vietnam has achieved significant improvements in poverty alleviation and social development. On the other hand, Vietnam is facing numerous new challenges due to rapid social change, including poverty, income inequality, family breakdown, rural-urban migration, unemployment, child labor, public health, and environmental pollution. In fact, the vast majority of Vietnam's remaining poor - 86 percent - are ethnic minorities (WB). To solve social problems due to economic development, one of the solutions is the development and professionalization of social work. In 2004, social work was officially recognized as a university discipline in Vietnam, and the Ministry of Education and Training approved the national Bachelor of Social Work Curriculum.

The social work profession has important roles in social development, intervening in the lives of people, families, social groups, and communities because social work is a profession and not an ideology. According to the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics, social workers pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people. Social workers' social change efforts are focused primarily on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice. Similarly, Clark (2007) noted that most students agreed that the traditional mission of social work emphasizes helping the poor and disadvantaged through direct services and advocacy in the form of political and social action. Therefore, poverty is one of the main interests in the field of social work, and future social workers are expected to show greater understanding for the poor. For this reason, it is important to identify how social work students perceive the causes of poverty.

To date, many studies have been conducted to explore individual attitudes toward poverty and poor populations. Schwartz and Robinson (1991), by using the Feagin Poverty Scale, investigated the perceptions of the causes of poverty of the three groups of social work students at a midsized urban university in the Midwest with a department of social work and found that all three groups attributed poverty mostly to the structural factor and least to personal deficiency. Similarly, Rosenthal (1993) developed two scales (The Belief in Individual Cause of Poverty scale and The Antipathy to the Poor scale) to measure the attitudes of graduate social work students toward impoverished people. Rehner and colleagues (1997) used the Attitude toward Poverty developed by Atherton and his colleagues (1993) to study Mississippi social workers' attitudes toward poverty and the poor.

Another study conducted by Sun (2001) used Feagin's poverty scale to measure social work students' and nonsocial work students' perceptions of the causes of poverty. In 2010, Yun & Weaver developed the 21-item *Attitude toward Poverty Short Form scale* that measures people's attitudes toward poverty and poor people. This scale includes three factors that measure a range of diverse attitudes toward poverty and poor populations, such as personal deficiency, stigma and structural perspective. Brief summaries of the previous studies on student perceptions of causes of poverty provide a context for the current study.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to identify what social work students (SW) and nonsocial work (NSW) students perceive as the causes of poverty. Understanding the perceived causes of poverty is important in addressing the issue of poverty. To the best of our knowledge, this paper is probably the first to measure students' attitudes toward poverty in Vietnam to date.

Main Text

Objectives of the Study

Based on the brief literature review of attitudes toward poverty research, the author determines the following research aim of this paper:

- To test the 21 items of the ATP-SF developed by Yun & Weaver (2010) in the Vietnamese context.
- To explore the perceptions of Vietnamese students on the causes of poverty.
- To examine the differences in perceptions and attitudes of poverty between students of social work and nonsocial work.

Materials And Methods

Data collection

The data were collected in August 2020, the first semester of the 2020-2021 academic year. Participants who were full-time second-year and third-year students at Ho Chi Minh City Open University, Ho Chi Minh

City, Vietnam decided to take part in the survey voluntarily. The survey was conducted by using convenience nonprobability sampling and a survey questionnaire.

The survey questionnaire includes two parts. The first section contains items collecting information about the respondent's characteristics, including gender, university year of study, age, academic performance, ethnicity, and student's family economic status. The second part consists of 21 items related to the attitudes of respondents about poverty and/or impoverished persons. The questionnaire items have been used from previous research, developed by Yun & Weaver (2010) including three dimensions of poverty: *the personal deficiency* 7- item subscale measured "individualistic beliefs" that indicated a person feels that poverty is due to factors such as lack of ability or lack of effort; *the stigma* 8- item subscale measured if a person has stigma toward individuals living in poverty such as increased fraud, feelings of entitlement, and being lazy; and *the structural perspective* 6- item subscale measured one's willingness to support social programs and society's responsibility to help the poor. The items are scored on a 5-point Likert scale such as 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = neutral, 4 = disagree, and 5 = strongly disagree. All 21 items were summed to create a total score with a range between 21 and 105. Higher scores denote strong negative attitudes toward three dimensions of poverty, and lower scores reflect more positive attitudes toward three dimensions of poverty. Most likely, this was the first application of ATP-SF in the Vietnamese context.

However, as the participants were Vietnamese students, the items were translated into Vietnamese from the original English version. Some words have been modified to be more suitable to the Vietnamese context (for example, "federal budget" is replaced by "state budget"). After obtaining the lecturers' permission, the author administered questionnaires to students in their classrooms. Students were told that the study was to explore their perceptions of poverty and were told that the study was voluntary and anonymous. Respondents' names were not included in the data to maintain privacy. To complete the questionnaire form, students spent approximately 15 min answering all questions. The results collected 180 valuable responses.

Data analysis

The collected data were entered and analyzed using Excel and SPSS version 20 (SPSS, Inc., Chicago IL, US), respectively. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages were presented using tables. For reliability, internal consistency reliability of 21 items of the three constructs of poverty was carried out by calculating Cronbach's alpha coefficient. In addition, we used the independent-samples *t*-test (one-tailed) test to compare means between SW students and NSW students. The level of significance was set at ($P < 0.05$).

Results And Discussion

The results of the survey are as follows

Demographic characteristics

A total of 180 students participated in the study. Among them, 86 were social work students, and the other 94 students were from law (n=34), foreign language (n=30) and economics (n=30). The gender distribution included 42 males (23.3%) and 138 females (76.7%). The majority of students who completed the survey were females because the number of female students of Ho Chi Minh City Open University was more than seventy percent. The university year of study distribution included 105 (58.3%) second-year students and 75 (41.7%) third-year students. The mean age of the entire sample was 20.5 years old (SD=0.95). The demographic characteristics of the participants are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. *Demographic characteristics of the sample*

Variables	Category	Frequency	Percent (%)
Gender	<i>Total</i>	<i>180</i>	<i>100.0</i>
	Male	42	23.3
	Female	138	76.7
University year of studying	<i>Total</i>	<i>180</i>	<i>100.0</i>
	Second year	105	58.3
	Third year	75	41.7
Fields of study	<i>Total</i>	<i>180</i>	<i>100.0</i>
	Social work	86	47.8
	Non-social work	94	52.2
Academic performance	<i>Total</i>	<i>176</i>	<i>97.8</i>
	Very good	17	9.4
	Fair	112	62.2
	Average	47	26.1
	<i>Missing</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>2.2</i>
Family economic status	<i>Total</i>	<i>180</i>	<i>100.0</i>
	High income	60	33.3
	Middle income	109	60.6
	Low income	11	6.1
Ethnicity	<i>Total</i>	<i>178</i>	<i>98.9</i>
	Kinh (vietnamese)	173	96.1
	Others	5	2.8
	<i>Missing</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>1.1</i>
Age	<i>Total</i>	<i>180</i>	<i>100.0</i>
	Mean	20.5	
	SD	0.95	

Students' attitudes toward poverty

Table 2 presents the mean and standard deviation of the ATP-SF 21 items and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the three dimensions of poverty. According to Taber (2018), a reliability value of Cronbach's alpha between 0.58 and 0.97 qualifies for satisfactory reliability of the scale measured, while a value greater than 0.70 shows relatively high internal consistency. Thus, the three subscales of the

questionnaire had satisfactory reliability. Specifically, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for *the personal deficiency* factor was 0.698, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for *the stigma* factor was 0.652 and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for *the structural perspective* factor was 0.586. Thus, compared to the Yun & Weaver study (2010), the Cronbach's alpha coefficients of this study were lower.

Table - 2. *Descriptive results of participants' responses*

Variables	Statements	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
<i>Personal deficiency (PD) (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.698)</i>						
PD1	Poor people are different from the rest of society	178*	1	5	3.74	0.90
PD2	Poor people are dishonest	180	2	5	4.38	0.73
PD3	Most poor people are dirty	178*	2	5	4.57	0.67
PD4	Poor people act differently	179**	1	5	4.15	0.84
PD5	Children raised on welfare will never amount to anything	179**	3	5	4.60	0.55
PD6	I believe poor people have a different set of values than do other people	179**	1	5	2.92	1.17
PD7	Poor people generally have lower intelligence than nonpoor people	180	2	5	4.34	0.78
<i>Stigma (STg) (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.652)</i>						
STg1	There is a lot of fraud among welfare recipients	180	1	5	2.53	0.86
STg2	Some "poor" people live better than I do, considering all their benefits	180	1	5	3.12	0.87
STg3	Poor people think they deserve to be supported	180	1	5	2.87	0.86
STg4	Welfare mothers have babies to get more money	180	1	5	3.26	1.03
STg5	An able-bodied person collecting welfare is ripping off the system	180	1	5	3.07	1.08
STg6	Unemployed poor people could find jobs if they tried harder.	180	1	5	2.23	1.00
STg7	Welfare makes people lazy	180	1	5	2.92	0.98
STg8	Benefits for poor people consume a major part of the state budget	180	1	5	3.03	0.77
<i>Structural perspective (SP) (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.586)</i>						
SP1	People are poor due to circumstances beyond their control	179**	1	5	2.71	1.07
SP2	I would support a program that resulted in higher taxes to support social programs for poor people	180	1	5	3.34	0.99
SP3	If I were poor, I would accept welfare benefits	180	1	5	2.54	0.88
SP4	People who are poor should not be blamed for their misfortune	179**	1	5	1.92	0.87

SP5	Society has the responsibility to help poor people	180	1	5	2.45	0.93
SP6	Poor people are discriminated against	180	1	5	2.31	0.89

Note:

SD = Standard deviation

* Missing: 2 cases; ** Missing: 1 case

A comparison of the mean scores for attitudes toward poverty between SW students and NSW students is presented in Table 3. An independent-samples *t*-test using (one-tailed) revealed significant differences in the personal deficiency dimension and in the stigma dimension of poverty scores among the two groups of students.

Table - 3. *Independent-samples t-test between SW students and NSW students on three dimensions of poverty*

Dimensions	Group of students	N	Mean	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Personal deficiency	SW	86	3.97	-3.709	178	0.000
	NSW	94	4.23			
Stigma	SW	86	2.71	-4.639	178	0.000
	NSW	94	3.04			
Structural perspective	SW	86	2.52	-0.776	178	0.439
	NSW	94	2.58			

Note: SW = Social work; NSW = Nonsocial work

As such, when looking for causes of poverty, SW students and NSW students place the most emphasis on structural factors of poverty. However, SW students, compared with NSW students, consider personal deficiency and stigma more important. These findings are not consistent with similar studies conducted in other countries. For example, a study conducted by Ljubotina & Ljubotina (2007) in Croatia indicated that SW students perceived individual factors as significantly less important causes of poverty than students of economics and agriculture. Another study conducted by Wollie (2009) also showed that youths in Bahir Dar (Ethiopia) were more inclined to attribute poverty to structural factors. The SW students were favoured more on the personal deficiency and the stigma in the poverty explanation because the social work teaching of the Ho Chi Minh City Open University focuses more on social work with individuals. Indeed, the aim of the Ho Chi Minh City Open University' social work education is "the project management, project work on community development, social development, participation in poverty reduction project, capacity building for women, career orientation and job creation for youth, participating in the construction of the saving credit programs"

Conclusion And Limitations

Indeed, Vietnamese social work is in its infancy (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2016), which is an exploratory study in nature. The survey results indicated that SW students and NSW students place the most emphasis on structural factors of poverty. However, NSW students did not overwhelmingly attribute poverty to personal and stigma factors, as expected, and this finding is consistent with a previous study. Individualistic and stigma perspectives are internal factors and indicate negative attitudes toward poverty; thus, SW students are more likely to be inclined to negative or internal attitudes toward poverty. This is a main challenge for professional socialization and congruence with the desired social work values. Therefore, social work education must provide opportunities for SW students to compare their views of social issues such as poverty.

The current study has several limitations. First, the research was limited by a small sample size, and the sample was limited to one university, so there was limited possibility of generalizing the findings to all other social work or nonsocial work students. Thus, future research could strengthen the findings of this study by exploring attitudes toward poverty in other universities. Additionally, future research should investigate attitudes toward poverty among poor individuals and Vietnamese people. This can provide a better understanding of the causal factor of poverty so that further improvement to the current social work education program can be done.

Finally, the data analysis used only descriptive statistics; thus, another future research direction is to explore attitudes toward poverty by applying multivariate statistical methods such as logistic regression models and/or correspondence analysis. Research into attitudes toward poverty could serve as a good guideline for creators of social policies focused on preventing or helping eradicate poverty.

Declarations

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Availability of data and materials

The data are not available for public access because of privacy concerns but are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

All students agree to participate in research voluntarily

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The author declares that there are no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that have or could be perceived to have influenced the work reported in this article.

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