

# **Social Work off the Page: Two American Social Worker Students in Vietnam**

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**Abstract:** In our narrative, supported by our practice and our experience, we discuss the difficulties of being American-trained social workers and trying to influence change through field work in Vietnam. We will examine and reflect upon our personal and professional growth through interactions at the Da Nang Social Welfare Center, focusing on a 13-year-old male orphan and the environment in which he lives. This paper will also share our experiences with the University of Da Nang and the ways in which we tried to create sustainability. Our involvement as students working with the Vietnamese lifted the profession of social work off the pages of text books and into reality.

**Keywords:** sustainability, Vietnam, social welfare, orphans, social workers

## **Introduction**

The State University of New York College at Brockport's Vietnam Study Abroad Program has been in existence for fifteen years, providing American students with a unique opportunity to become more educated about the Vietnamese culture and service the Da Nang community. We originally planned to participate in the Vietnam Program for one month during the winter session of our senior year. We soon decided to stay in Vietnam for an additional three months to complete our field placement for our BSW, a first in the program's history. In addition to our field placement requirements, we collaborated with the faculty at Da Nang University to implement a social work internship program. The field of social work is a developing field in Vietnam and the Da Nang University program is merely two years old. Similar to the profession in the United States during the early 1900's with Jane Adams as the forerunner, social work in Vietnam is transitioning from a charity model to a human rights based one. We came to Vietnam with the expectation that our worldview would be broadened however, something more profound happened during our initial visit to the Da Nang Social Welfare Center.

## **Social Welfare Center**

The Social Welfare Center is a government run agency that provides shelter for many of Da Nang's marginalized groups such as: indigent and homeless individuals, elders with no family, physically disabled, intellectually challenged, and abandoned or orphaned children. Funding for the Center comes

from the city budget, donations from community members, and contributions from non-government organizations, similar to many nonprofit human service organizations in the United States. The Center is directed under the administration of Mr. Lien who oversees the faculty. There are thirty staff members currently employed at the Center with three Vice Directors working alongside Mr. Lien. Each Vice Director is in charge of a different department: administration, education and counseling, and health. The majority of staff members work within the administration department, leaving a sizable gap in other departments. The Center is severely understaffed and the residents do not receive adequate services due the disproportionate ratio of staff members to residents. There are 150 to 200 residents currently housed at the Center, most will never be allowed to leave due to the regulations.

There are three ways to be admitted to the Center. Some clients who are homeless are admitted after filling out an application requesting to stay at the Center. The second is if an individual is on the street begging or displaying abnormal behavior and is seized by authorities after a member of the community calls a hotline to make a report. The final method of admission occurs when families who are unable to provide for a member who is disabled abandon them at the Center. There are three ways to be released from the Center. If at the age of 18 an individual is able to find a job and stable housing, they may file for release. However, this requires management approval. Secondly, a resident who is at least 15 years of age can be sponsored by a volunteer or family with the agreement the sponsor will provide housing as payment in return for work. Lastly, if a resident has

family, a worker from the center may reach out to resolve issues between them so that the resident can eventually return home. Through interviews with residents and staff, we understand that reintegration into society is not likely.

My (Travis) first impressions of the Social Welfare Center were mixed; it was unlike anything I had ever seen, both fascinating and frightening at the same time. On one hand it was fascinating to see how a facility in an underdeveloped country deals with such populations. On the other hand, I was frightened, because it was not only an environment that seemed uncontrolled; it was one that I was completely unfamiliar with. While I saw the need for such a place and I realized that the idea of housing these forgotten or abandoned people was with good intention, I observed the poor conditions and the lack of resources immediately. The Center is isolated from society, placed on a dead-end road in the outskirts of Da Nang city. There are so many different populations of people here that no one can get the care they need. There are no specialized services for individuals with specific needs. In actuality, the staff members are untrained and simply fill a position. As I (Jaime) walked around the sidewalks of the Center, I felt almost immobilized. My thoughts raced as I began to assess and evaluate the risk and protective factors that I saw; providing any amount of substantial help or change seemed too big an obstacle. While residents have shelter, food, and clothing the conditions are unsanitary and in many ways violate the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.

Residents at the Center receive the absolute basics in order to survive and at times, are treated maliciously by staff members. I (Travis) noticed the only love and attention that residents receive comes from other residents. Many residents treat each other as you would imagine brothers and sisters do, sometimes affectionately and other times argumentatively. We saw the communal characteristic inherent in the Vietnamese culture seep through the cracks of the concrete walls.

In the back of the Center, a group of young men with varying cognitive and physical disabilities are kept tied to chairs which are tied to a fence. The lack of staff has driven the Center to these measures, restricting residents' mobility for the safety of

themselves and those around them. In the next room, children and young adults with cerebral palsy and other serious conditions can be found lying in metal cribs for hours at a time with no stimulation, unable to move. Their bodies are at an advanced state of atrophy; misshaped heads and twisted limbs lay flat as if they were frozen. They are only taken out of their cribs to be fed. When a staff member feeds them, they shove food down their throats until they are literally choking, spitting half of the food out down their clothes. One building away there are two more girls also restrained in chairs. A girl around the age of 10 who suffers from epilepsy and autism repeatedly knees herself in the head as a result of lack of treatment. A massive protrusion emanates from the side of her head, surrounded by bruises and scabs. Her moans and her screams are continual and echo throughout the Center. The environment and the sounds surrounding us caused an unsettling feeling in us both. I (Travis) felt unsure of how to respond to these situations because there was an overwhelming need for assistance that pulled me in every direction.

Most of the time there are flies covering the residents. Many of them are unable to move their limbs to brush them away. Often times they sit in their own excrement or soiled clothes which are changed infrequently. Prior to this, I (Jaime) had only read about or seen conditions such as these on television or in movies. Up until this point, issues like this felt a world away. It wasn't until I stood in the midst of the Welfare Center that I realized how sheltered I was. On multiple occasions, we bathed and changed the clothes of people who were weak and malnourished.

For the first time, we found ourselves outside the protection of the classroom and confronted with the realities of international social work, which are so different from that which we have previously experienced. Treatment and care for the residents only improve when the staff knows that volunteers are coming, and even then the improvements are minimal. This is drastically different from what we had previously experienced working in agencies where the care is continual, policies are in place, and standards are adhered to. The Center relies on volunteers to stimulate and care for its occupants. I (Travis) shudder at the thought of what the residents' life would be like were it not for volunteers that frequent the Center. Witnessing conditions such as these for the first time brought tears to both our eyes and fueled our

aspiration to stay in Vietnam and affect change to the best of our ability.

### **Tuân**

Perhaps one of the most impactful cases that we worked with at the Center was a boy named “Tuân”. The first time I (Travis) met Tuân he was carrying around a dead bird that he had found lying within the compound. He was carrying the dead bird by its legs and gently swinging it back and forth. The bird was the “toy for the day” and he and the other young boys took turns playing with it. They played with the bird as if it was a doll, shaking it and manipulating all the movable parts.

Since I knew nothing about Tuân at this point, I remember wondering if he had an intellectual condition. At this time I was not familiar with his story and I was very disturbed by the whole scene. As I (Travis) spent more time at the Center, I began to learn more about this young man. He was always excited to play and interact. One day while we were getting ready to start packing up at the Center, Tuân appeared. He was dusty and dirty, his clothes were filthy, and his sandals were torn. He walked up to me, and with the help of my friend who could translate, I had a small conversation with him. I (Travis) engaged him with simple questions to learn about his story and what he does daily. I (Travis) learned that he was an orphan and had been living at the Center for three years. If Tuân is not working or sleeping, he tries to play with some of the other residents. Tuân has an energy that is contagious and I (Travis) found myself becoming more motivated and enthusiastic when interacting with him. I (Travis) wondered how he still had such positive energy while living in a place such as this; it became clear that he embodies what it means to be resilient. Tuân obviously has coping skills that he utilizes but I could not see them and I decided that I would explore this further. Through a translator, Tuân began opening up to me (Travis) about his personal story of how and why he came to be at the Center. I (Travis) became somber and empathetic to his situation however, being outside of my own culture, I felt unsure of how to respond. I patted his shoulder and gave him a slow nod, as I’ve learned this is an acceptable way to communicate that you care in Vietnamese culture.

We later interviewed him with the help of our friend who is our unofficial translator and a person Tuân is familiar with. I (Jaime) know that Tuân likes art and so we used water color paints for an activity, to avoid the pressure and uncomfortableness of a question and answer session. I learned this method of engagement through past experience working with children in a special needs school. We painted and playfully smeared each other’s faces while asking questions about his history, his experience here at the Center, and his aspirations. He told us he grew up in Southern Vietnam and his parents died when he was around the age of nine, his father from cancer and his mother from an accident. Following their deaths, Tuân thought that a family member was going to pick him up but no one came. He shared with us that his mother’s and father’s families did not get along, that there was some sort of miscommunication, and Tuân was abandoned and left to his own devices.

As he talked more about his family, his eyes remained fixed on the picture he was painting and his mouth grimaced. He went on to tell us that after days of being on his own, he decided to just start walking. He walked north with no destination, catching rides and receiving money from kind strangers, eventually making his way to Da Nang. Once there, he explained that he was lost in the city. After some time he was stopped by police and brought to the Welfare Center. Hearing Tuân’s arduous journey, we were astounded by the fact that he has experienced all that he has in his thirteen years of life. While I (Jaime) don’t speak or understand Vietnamese that well, I could hear the pain and loss in his voice. I (Travis) wondered what I would have done at nine years old had I been faced with a similar situation, with no family to turn to and no one to care for me. The courage that Tuân displayed to make the decision to continue to survive is awe-inspiring. I (Jaime) tried to imagine the terror of being a young child surrounded by a world that is unknown and without anyone to support and watch over me.

While Tuân has found refuge at the Welfare Center where he is provided clothing and food each day, he still lacks a stable, trustworthy support system. According to Hutchison (2013), the social environment – family, peers, institutions, community, and culture – are significant elements of adolescent life. As adolescents become more independent and move into the world, they develop their own

relationships within the social environment (Hutchison, 2013). Tuân has reached the stage in his life where he may begin asking himself “who am I?” or “how am I different?” this is the start of the process of individuation. Individuation is defined as “the development of a self or identity that is unique and separate” (Hutchinson, 2013, p. 563). While the Vietnamese culture is a collective one, Tuân is still experiencing these feelings and thoughts. Everyone is a unique person and their identity is what strengthens the community. It is important for this process to be fostered, not stifled.

During our visits we observed many interactions that Tuân had with other staff members and residents. By staff members he is treated as a laborer and is subservient. Dressed in crisp button-down shirts, dress pants and leather shoes, the directors roam the grounds of the Center each day, ordering the able bodied residents to do things for them. Washing themselves in well-water only a few times a week, Tuân and other young boys spend their days gardening or performing odd jobs around the Center such as: fixing windows and awnings, repairing buildings, and breaking bricks. While these activities serve as a break in the monotony in the life of the Center and give residents a purpose, members of administration exploit Tuân and the other young men. Often times we have seen the director throw his clothes at Tuân with the expectation that he would do his laundry. On one occasion, we witnessed one of the vice directors sitting in the shade while Tuân cleaned his head of white hairs, a trend among upper class Vietnamese men. Tuân shared with us that his belongings and gifts from volunteers are often confiscated by staff members. Treatment such as this is not only demeaning but has caused Tuân to live in a state of anxiousness and distrust.

As our relationship with Tuân developed, we began to spend more time with him in his housing unit where we would play cards. One afternoon, Tuân quickly swept the deck of cards under his pillow as a staff member walked by. I (Jaime) could see the panic on his face, desperate to keep one of his only possessions for just a little longer. Tuân’s fear of authority has affected his ability to trust. According to Flanagan and Stout (2011), “Social trust reflects an individual’s positive view of humanity, the belief that people generally treat others fairly rather than

try to maximize their own gain at others’ expense” (2nd para). We saw how years of living in a prison-like institution began to affect his behavior and questioned how these characteristics would transition into society, if he is ever allowed to leave the Center. It was a harsh reality to see a child’s rights not protected and in fact, those who are responsible for upholding these rights are the ones exploiting them. I (Travis) often felt disgust towards those who exploited Tuân and angry at the thought that he may never leave the Center. At times, I (Jaime) felt powerless and insignificant in improving Tuân’s situation and found myself desperately wanting to find a way to help him feel safe and find comfort.

Unlike Vietnamese children that we shared time with outside the confines of the Center, Tuân has an awareness of the world and a strong sense of independence. While he is restricted to the grounds of the Center, he is seemingly less sheltered than children who have strong family and community supports. Given that Tuân is in an environment that has pressured him into self-reliance, it is hard for him to build deep relationships. This is contrary to the collectivism of Vietnamese culture in that it relies on a kinship with neighbors and others in their community.

The Welfare Center is a disjointed community, one that is isolated and forgotten. When talking with Tuân one afternoon, I (Travis) asked if he had any friends here at the Center and he replied with a terse “no”. I (Travis) asked Tuân about another boy that is of similar age; he shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. I (Travis) noticed that Tuân has a hardness about him, he is used to people coming in and out of his life. Although Tuân is guarded, I (Jaime) witnessed him demonstrate compassion towards residents who are suffering from severe disabilities and neglect, despite the abuse that he endures from others at the Center. In one day, I (Jaime) saw a range of emotions in Tuân; from anger and frustration when he was hit by an older resident for no reason to love and genuineness when he held the hand of a younger resident with Down syndrome. Tuân’s character reflects that of the Vietnamese culture in that he internalizes his aggravation and converts it into compassion. Initially, I (Jaime) wanted to encourage Tuân to release his anger through talking, what I know to be a healthy coping skill however, it occurred to me that personal openness is not a behavior that is common amongst Vietnamese. I (Jaime) began to recognize that coping

skills may look different across cultures but that does not make them wrong or less effective.

We primarily utilized the Life Course Perspective to evaluate and understand Tuân and the point that he is at developmentally. This model is a western one that exemplifies American culture and therefore does not always apply to the Vietnamese culture. However, by referring to the biopsychosocial concepts of this framework and revisiting our own adolescence, we were able to gain a better interpretation of the elements that shape Tuân's growth and identify the gaps where cultural differences exist. Through this practice, we realized how critical it is to understand the client with which you are working and the importance of cultural competency.

Tuân is in the stage of early adolescence; his body and mind are beginning to change more rapidly. Biological, psychological, and social changes such as: the onset of puberty, increased moodiness, seeking sameness, and less structure, are just a few of the examples that occur during this stage (Hutchison, 2013). Tuân is in the process of creating his own identity and discovering what kind of person he wants to be. According to Hutchison (2013), early adolescence is the stage in which individuals become creative thinkers and begin to consider their future. We wondered if this was true for Tuân. I (Travis) noticed he often would take pictures and draw while we were at the Center.

I (Travis) asked Tuân what he was interested in and what he would like to do professionally in his future and he answered that he wants to be a photographer. At the Center, Tuân is not being challenged or fed intellectually. Tuân shared with us that he has never had the opportunity to go to school during his time at the Center. The closest thing to educational material Tuân possesses is a comic book given to him by a previous volunteer. During our second interview with Tuân he shared that he has a third grade education and expressed his desire to go back to school. The lack of opportunity and positive influences at the Center could prove to be detrimental to him.

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2014), education is a fundamental human right and

essential for the exercise of all other human rights. Education promotes empowerment and yields individual freedom (UNESCO, 2014). Yet millions of children and adults remain deprived of educational opportunities, many as a result of poverty, Tuân being just one of them. "Poverty, nutritional deficiencies and inadequate learning opportunities are among the leading reasons that at least 200 million children in the developing world are not reaching their developmental potential" (World Bank, 2013).

The UNESCO (2014) has created international legal obligations which promote the right of every person to have access to quality education. The legal and political responsibilities of education fall upon the governments of individual countries who are members of the United Nations, Vietnam being one of them. The Vietnamese value education and the Socialist Republic has worked to establish a reputable schooling system that most are able to enjoy. However, the people at the Social Welfare Center have been forgotten.

Currently, agencies are underfunded, understaffed, and lack specialized training and education necessary to work with a variety of marginalized and vulnerable groups. Vietnam is quickly developing but with little consideration to minority populations. Isolated holes in society such as the Welfare Center are where the profession of social work can take root in Vietnam. The profession of social work, regardless of national boundaries, seeks to enhance human wellbeing, empower the oppressed, promote social justice, and encourage social change. The National Association of Social Work (2014) identifies the responsibility of the profession to facilitate the ability of people to address their own needs and discover their own solutions.

### **Da Nang University**

With the understanding that our time in Vietnam would come to an end, we wanted to create sustainability. In effort to avoid imperialism, we saw an opportunity to bridge a connection between the Da Nang University and the Social Welfare Center. When we first went to the University we found that social work students were restricted to studying the profession in a classroom setting. The majority of social work students had never even heard of the Social Welfare Center and the conditions came as a shock to many of them when they first accompanied us

there. With our own understanding of the importance that field work plays in deepening knowledge of theories and frameworks, it was obvious to us that the same opportunity should be offered to them. The Council on Social Work Education recognizes field education as the “signature pedagogy” of the profession and is essential in shaping competent social workers (CSWE, 2014).

Initially, the students were overwhelmed and fearful of the clients at the Center. Just as we were, they were unsure of how to interact or engage. As questions and conversations emerged, we found ourselves in a leadership role, teaching through modeling. The first day that the students joined us at the Center was also the day that we decided to untie the young men from their chairs for the first time. Surrounded by students in what felt like a whirlpool of chaos, we began untying the residents. We were quickly bombarded by the raised voices and shaking fingers of staff members. In this moment we stood up for the rights of the clients and began a discussion, explaining our reasoning and our willingness to accept responsibility. One by one the residents were unrestrained and with the help of the students we guided them out of the building and into the sun.

We saw our own passion reflected in the social work students, and we tried to harness that energy, in effort to direct it towards something tangible in their own community. It was through this relationship with the social work students and their experiences that we realized our own potential, and social work became real. Through bringing awareness to the students, we brought awareness to ourselves and discovered a confidence that allowed us to be leaders, to make decisions, to be spontaneous, and to create change. We realized that possibilities for change are limitless and ideas can be cultivated into reality.

### **Cultural Competency**

In some aspects, social work is a profession that matches elements of the Vietnamese culture, in that it is collective, values helping, and serving fellow members of their community (Durst, 2010). However, traditional Vietnamese culture maintains respect, and tends not to challenge or question those

in a position of authority (Durst, 2010; LaBorde, 2010). While it is important to respect authoritative figures, it may prove to be detrimental to initiating change and making progress in certain situations. A cornerstone of the social work profession is advocacy. Knowing when to challenge and when to advocate for the rights of a client is a skill that we hoped to introduce to the students as we recognized this may be a form of practice they had not yet seen before. Our ultimate goal was to promote Vietnamese helping Vietnamese. Through our own practice we sought to give students the opportunity to take what they learned from us and apply it as they see fit to their own culture.

One of the biggest challenges we faced during our time in Vietnam was not recognizing cultural differences, but learning to be sensitive and accepting of those differences. Awareness of cultural diversity is a core competency of the social work profession. As students, we learned about cultural competency and never anticipated the struggle that we encountered when we found ourselves immersed in a culture so different from our own. Characteristics of our own culture and that of the Vietnamese became clearer as we tried to implement western models. For instance, American individualism promotes free thinking and the challenging of authority whereas the Vietnamese mindset tends to respect authority and remain obedient to the family and community, which they hold greater than the individual (Durst, 2010).

We quickly began to realize that social work practice will look very different in Vietnam. Western ideologies, as they are inherently individualistic, are not always applicable to non-western cultures (Alex, 2013). Rather, an integrated blend of knowledge, cultural, political, and economic philosophies will be better adaptable within non-western cultures (Alex, 2013). While working with Da Nang University to develop a field work program, we had to continuously assess ourselves and refrain from imposing our views of what is right and how things “should be.” We learned to listen. Through living and absorbing the culture, we did not disregard our own, but rather gained a dual perspective on people and their interactions with the environment.

### **Farewells and Reflections**

Our last day in Vietnam was spent at the Welfare

Center with Tuấn and other residents. It was surreal to know that this may be the last time we ever see any of these people again. It was business as usual at the Center, I (Travis) was interacting just as I did any other day, except this time I was burying my grief, numbing myself in anticipation of saying goodbye. I (Jaime) had been dreading the day that we would say “tạm biệt” to the incredible individuals that we were so fortunate to work with. It felt as though I was abandoning them, like so many other volunteers who come and go do.

Tuân was on his bunk when the time came to tell him that we would be leaving. As our friend translated this to him, we could see the shock fill his face as his eyes widened. He jumped off of his bunk and into my (Travis) arms and kissed me on the cheek. I (Travis) flashed back to when we first met and our interaction was as modest as a pat on the shoulder. This was my (Jaime) first experience with the termination process and as I struggled with heartache I was overcome by tears. Tuấn jumped down and began rummaging through his meager belongings. He appeared in front of me (Jaime) with a tissue and began to wipe my eyes. As we walked towards the exit, Tuấn yelled out his window and motioned for me (Travis) to come back. He gave me a small battered figurine of a cartoon character. Knowing that he has very little, I (Travis) refused to take it but with a playful smile he insisted. I (Travis) smiled back and then turned to walk away so that he could not see my eyes fill with tears. We found it interesting that on this day Tuấn displayed more togetherness and strength than we did. As he comforted us, we were reminded of his resiliency and his story of survival. Throughout our four months working at the Welfare Center we focused on making a difference in the lives of the residents. It wasn't until our last day that we realized the real difference and the biggest change had occurred within us.

Our work with the social work students and the University to create sustainability is the only reason that enabled us to walk away from this project with a feeling of hope. Social work students will continue to provide support to residents and in the future may even bring programs to the Center such as: educational programs, vocational training, hygiene classes, etc. It is exciting to think about all of the possibilities and opportunities that await the social

work students as they are the first of their profession in Vietnam. Our experience in Vietnam as a whole represents what the profession of social work truly is – to make connections, foster helping relationships, empower people to help themselves, and then let go.

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