Professionalism and Professional Ethics: Representative Perspectives of Social Researchers in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

Professionalism has always been an influential concept in the social sciences. However, its definition and characteristics constantly require cross-checking and modification to adapt to the growing multifaceted contexts in modern times. This paper offers a small-scale qualitative study examining the perceptions of professionalism and professional ethics of the social research community in Vietnam to understand and acknowledge their contextual conditions and hardships. The findings reveal the complex situation of social researchers in Vietnam, which demands that they respond to external pressures and requirements while maintaining professional ethics and good consciousness. Locally, two corresponding issues are highlighted: unsatisfactory education and training and a lack of motivation for long-term changes. More broadly, the paper proposes a theory of selective motivations and a set of extensive tools, adapted from existing literature, to effectively address professionalism from a marginalized perspective.

Introduction

Professionalism is an important means of social order and social progress in civil society. The authority and principles of professionals are key to moving beyond outside "oppressive central bureaucracy" and "occupational control" (Evetts, 2003, p. 403), assisting societies in challenging the dominant ideology of existing organizational and political systems (Costley et al., 2010). The ongoing expansion of knowledge and professional practice alters the connection between research and practice (Scanlon, 2011), as researchers and practitioners redefine concepts such as "professionals" and "professionalism" to accommodate more modern multidimensional impacts (Davey and Bredemeyer, 2011), thus raising standards, pressures, responsibilities, and societal expectations on these experts. Despite this tendency to expand the modern understanding of these concepts (Evetts, 2013), contemporary research on professionalism and ethics still prioritizes traditionally prestigious occupations (Evetts, 2003; Scanlon, 2011) such as education, medicine, or law (Komić et al., 2015; MacKenzie, 2017). Aimed at combatting the neglect of certain professions by addressing occupational divisions beyond traditional contexts, this study is among the first to shed light on the overlooked social research profession in Vietnam; examining and foregrounding its underrepresented perspectives on professionalism and professional ethics, this study discusses the profession's educative attribution to local situations.

Social research and education both seek to create macro educational influences on society to potentially shift predominant mindsets. Social commentaries have always held the power to impact educational systems (Estes, 1994). For example, educational agendas have censored certain ideologies, such as those that supported different marginalized social groups and acknowledge different social issues based on the social prejudice against such groups and perspectives (Knox, 2015). The core of social research closely revolves around identifying and raising discourses about different contemporary social issues and marginalization, naturally imposing implicit forces on relevant local educational ideologies, systems, and agendas. That

makes discussions on ethics and professionalism in social research increasingly important, and further justifies the necessity of this study. Big entities like governments or international corporations already control information circulation, accessibilities, and instructive structures to a recognizable extent, arguably exerting more influence on countries with low individualism, such as Vietnam, who are less likely to question these establishments (Berti et al., 2020). Within such contexts, as local social researchers understand local society, they should be pioneering local social developments and recognizing contemporary social demands for macro changes. Therefore, the professionalism of these experts plays a decisive role in examining whether they can perform or have performed their jobs with adequate care and ethics to balance other social powers and enhance social awareness on diverse focuses, such as ongoing equality.

Addressing the gap between literature on modern professionalism and the local reality and its characteristics, this study specifically seeks the experiences and perspectives of social researchers (SRs) working in Vietnam, who directly deal with and thus possess unique angles on the local situation, to understand what notions of contemporary professionalism they align with. These insights will help provide necessary adjustments to improve the local system. This study thus contributes to the global literature on professionalism and ethics, fulfilling the corresponding gaps in modern social research and its educative core while widening the international gaze on marginalized countries such as Vietnam.

The next section outlines the relevant contextual backgrounds inspiring and implicitly justifying this research and its process. The third section details the methodology of data collection and analysis to demonstrate the research's transparency and further enhance the reliability of its results. As the main part of the paper, the fourth section provides interpretations and discussions on the findings, thus providing extensive answers to the targeted perspectives of SRs in

Vietnam. The last section then extends towards general conclusions for future research to cover the study's relevancy locally and internationally.

Contextual Background

The modern definition of professionalism has changed significantly over time, moving away from its traditional concept that governed only a limited range of occupations like laws (Evetts, 2003). As the former professionalism pinnacles, academic requirements, knowledge-based training, and experiences are no longer sufficient alone to timely meet the complex demands of modern society (Costley et al., 2010). This thus shifts the contemporary discourse on professionalism towards including neglected factors such as background, contextual surroundings, and personal trajectories (Beckett, 2011). Because professional development is never an isolated progress (Costley et al., 2010; Kegan, 1982; Lee, 2011), professionalism must account for the *whole process of growing and developing as a person and professional equally*, including the said factors. This reciprocity of personal-professional identities in learning, working, and living is the first characteristic of modern professionalism (Scanlon, 2011). That process is deeply rooted in Wenger's (1998) perceptions of self-identity as an ongoing negotiation and coalition with a collective identity, which balances the freedom and authority of professionals with their social duties and expectations to serve the public (Evetts, 2003). The second characteristic of modern professionalism involves the external pressures imposed by societies on local professionals: the *professional ethics* deriving from morals and altruism (Davey and Bredemeyer, 2011; Lee, 2011), aid the professional self-discipline, motivation, and actions in prioritizing the welfare of others (Costley et al., 2010). The reciprocity of personal-professional identities and the professional ethics should play crucial roles in depicting any Vietnamese perceptions of contemporary professionalism.

The Professionalism of Social Research in Vietnam

As an intellectual instrument with many theoretical and pragmatic applications, social research constantly shapes the future direction of many social policies at international and local levels by revealing key insights from personal and public knowledge (Sarantakos, 2017). In this sense, the history of social research closely aligns with the evolution of sciences, humanity, and societies (Hoffer, 2013), thus making its understanding inseparable from the international and local contexts in which it operates. Within a global context, developed countries' social researchers are among the leading professionals in achieving the above discussed characteristics of reciprocal personal-professional identities and professional ethics, underpinned by the success of Western social science (Miller and Brewer, 2003). Educational instruction and training in social research are tailored for individuals in different settings (Roberts, 2007) and are subject to a variety of ethical guidelines (Mertens and Ginsberg, 2009). In contrast, developing countries, especially those within their post-colonial stages, are realistically further away from the tailored and diverse Western modern professionalism which is explained by the fact thatmost of these guidelines and literature are based on ideologies, cultures, and normative structures different from theirs (Bu, 2018; Scholl and Schermuly, 2020). As the context of this study, Vietnam, often in contrast with Western contexts, is characterized by their single-party communist political and economic structures (Huntington, 1967), anti-individualism ideologies and communal cultures (Nguyen, 2021), social progress (Marquis, 2000), development interests (Nguyen, 2023), and other general local contexts (Pham and Hayden, 2019). Considering the limited international attention given to Vietnam (Salemink, 2003), these characteristics further reinforce the need to understand professionalism from native perspectives to derive instructions and guidelines that will realistically work in Vietnam.

The above differences between Vietnam and developed countries also signal the corresponding gaps in understanding and governing the boundary of the social research community in Vietnam. Compared to the longstanding traditions of social

research and work in Western contexts, initiatives related to general social aid surged only recently in Vietnam, mainly during the last thirty years (Hines et al., 2010), implying the local needs for more attention and alteration. Such challenges are indeed recognized by the local authorities (Lan et al., 2024; Tran et al., 2023). Often controlled by the government, private parties, or NGOs, most local funding and projects in social research, prioritize instant local applications over academic implications (Nguyen, 2021; Vu, 2023), undoubtedly displaying many restrictions compared to international agendas. The new, smaller-scaled, pragmatic-skewed, and ambiguous local agendas currently governing social work and research areas set up certain expectations for social researchers, including the participants in this study. Such local agendas are thus different from the Western developed and detailed structures. Additionally, considering the lack of extensive local literature on the social research community, this study starts with a more general boundary of local social research to additionally scout for potential smaller divisions that can be applied to the local social research profession. Thus, the local social research community should first govern researchers of academic and practical projects aimed at aiding local society.

Within such a settled boundary, the local efforts to provide their SRs with timely assistance and tools should be acknowledged (Nguyen, 2021; Vu, 2023). However, there are still many mismatches between the local operations and the said professionalism standards. The local preferences for a pre-established mass educational system (Nguyen and Vu, 2015; Tran et al., 2016) and anti-individualism (Nguyen, 2022; Vu, 2023) significantly depower local professionals as their reflexivity, creativity, and scepticism are inevitably restricted (Lee, 2011). In fact, Fournier's (1999) organizational professionalism where SRs are motivated to "perform in ways the organization defines as appropriate [with the rewards of] career promotion and progress" (Evetts, 2003, p. 408) resonates the Vietnamese way of accounting, evaluating, and managing performance within education and practice (Vu, 2022; Vu, 2023). Such confined structural ways of evaluating

performances further highlight the similar purposes and structures between social research and education in Vietnam. Clearly contradicting the core idea of a professional's power and responsibility, the local SRs' inability to "minimiz[e] those hierarchies and power relations" may lead to heavier consequences where the rotation of privileges, money, and wealth is fixated (Costley et al., 2010, p. 196), resulting in fertile ground for local misbehaviour and violation of ethics (An and Dong, 2024; Tromme, 2016). This overview of current local standards around professionalism inevitably raises various questions surrounding local experts' educative powers and standards, inspiring close-up studies on the matter from insider perspectives.

Research Methodology

Data Collection

To deal with a nuanced topic while aiming for epistemology leaning towards subjectivity, this research used semi-structured interviews with qualitative latent coding and thematic analysis to prioritize empowering participants by critically attending to their experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Byrne, 2022). In meeting the aims above, the interview questionnaire built a gradual flow centralizing the perspectives of participants from a technical and a personal angle, then discussing the potential connection and transition between them, and their local community. Specific questions addressed the participants' personal understanding of concepts such as professionalism and professional ethics, their self-assessments relevant to their local peers and the current local situation,and potential necessary steps to ensure ethics in local research.

The targeted participants were researchers currently or recently working on social research projects in Vietnam. In this research, a social research project refers to any

study of individuals and societies aiming to centre humans and identify recurring social patterns. Thus, criteria qualify an extensive range of potential participants from various types of organizations where further strategies would reveal more insights into the established local social research community. Considering this study's limitations, convenience sampling (Battaglia, 2008) helps filter participants who would be more open to joining and sharing their experiences from the targeted available SRs in Vietnam. With University ethical approval, the research abided by corresponding guidelines on research ethics and the regulations on protecting personal data in Vietnam (Government, 2023), ensuring the participants' voluntary and informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and welfare. In this small-scale study, a total of seven participants (SR1 to SR7) volunteered to participate. Their educational backgrounds are presented in *Table 1*, indicating a certain diversity in educational mindsets and training. These participants mostly work in medium-large research companies and local non-government organizations (NGOs) with a wide and representative range of specialties, including humanitarian aid, economics, minority communities, and equality. Despite contacting researchers from a variety of organizations, including public departments, only SRs from these two types of entities volunteered, which partially implies existing restrictions of local SRs, but also foregrounds them as two crucial preliminary subdivisions of social research professions. Further limitations of this sample are addressed in the paper's last part.

TABLE 1. PARTICIPANTS' BACKGROUNDS SUMMARY

SRs	Undergraduate Education		Postgraduate Education	
	Domestic	Foreign	Domestic	Foreign
1	X			X

2	X			
3		X		X
4	X		X	
5	X			
6		X		
7	X			

Data Analysis

The research used Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic qualitative analysis to develop overarching themes. The first phase comprised a data familiarizing process via transcribing, reading, and note taking to document first impressions. The second phase required coding the data using inductive tactics to "best represent meaning as communicated by the participants" (Byrne, 2022, p. 1397). The third phase involved refining and grouping the prior codes into themes. At this stage, the code was categorized into two topics matching the two modern professionalism characteristics stated above: professional ethics and the reciprocity of personal–professional identities. The fourth phase involved reviewing and rearranging the themes and their identified patterns into visual displays. The fifth phase required revisiting the research aims to refine theme names and their overview. In the sixth and last phase, the study distilled the findings below.

Findings and Discussions

The theme map in *Figure 1* displays the research results and provokes further discussions and comparisons with existing theories, literature, and propositions. This map is colour-coded in blue and pink to clearly demonstrate how local social researchers in Vietnam view the professionalism and professional ethics. Each colour matches one of the upcoming subsections: blue for a portrayal of the main factors defining professionalism and professional ethics of SRs in Vietnam and pink for a preliminary presentation of the local community's current hardships. The dark-to-light transparency of each box colour correspondingly represents the high-to-low level of internal coding frequency, and thus emphasizes the levels of importance of each theme.

Factors Defining Local Professionalism

This subsection focuses on the mapped blue boxes in *Figure 1*, which are marked as Main Themes because they jointly meet the study aim of local communal professionalism and professional ethics. Overall, two streams of factors define the professionalism of SRs in Vietnam. First, the external stream represents the contexts affecting local working environments and the external qualifications for peer validation. Second, the internal stream dives into intrinsic values in self-defining professionalism, which concerns the internal competency to enhance work quality and the corresponding ethical consciousness of local SRs.

The first external factor is the local context, which contains three characteristics shaping the research environment in Vietnam. As governed by the first characteristic of modern professionalism (Scanlon, 2011) mentioned in earlier sections, this factor evidently supports extending existing literature to account for and focus on the contextual meanings of the concept to accurately grasp the true sense of being a professional (Mills, 2016; Yee and Thompson-Schill, 2016). In that sense, the question of "what is professionalism" is replaced by "what is

professionalism within this context" (Beckett, 2011). Correspondingly, as the first contextual characteristic, the local culture significantly affects the local ways of working and researching, especially in achieving professional quality (SR3, SR4, SR6). When studying humans and society, forming connections with local participants enables researchers to empathize and convey accurate understandings from the local perspectives.

> What are the contexts, living environments, and upbringing of the people? A basic background like that will affect the way I understand the views. (SR6)

However, under this characteristic's influence, local professionalism is at risk of negative echoes as the local working culture realistically involves various personal factors, such as interests (SR1, SR2, SR5, SR6) and relationships (SR2, SR4, SR7). Thus, the quality and possibility of a professional study heavily rely on how SRs build a more-than-professional relationship with their stakeholders, such as participants or local authorities. To local participants, having a close relationship or similar political views is especially helpful in getting their unfiltered answers and cooperative attitudes (SR4, SR6).

> Another difficulty is maintaining relationships with people in field research. The answers [to outsiders] are even more biased since the interviewees will want to make their communities more beautiful. (SR4)
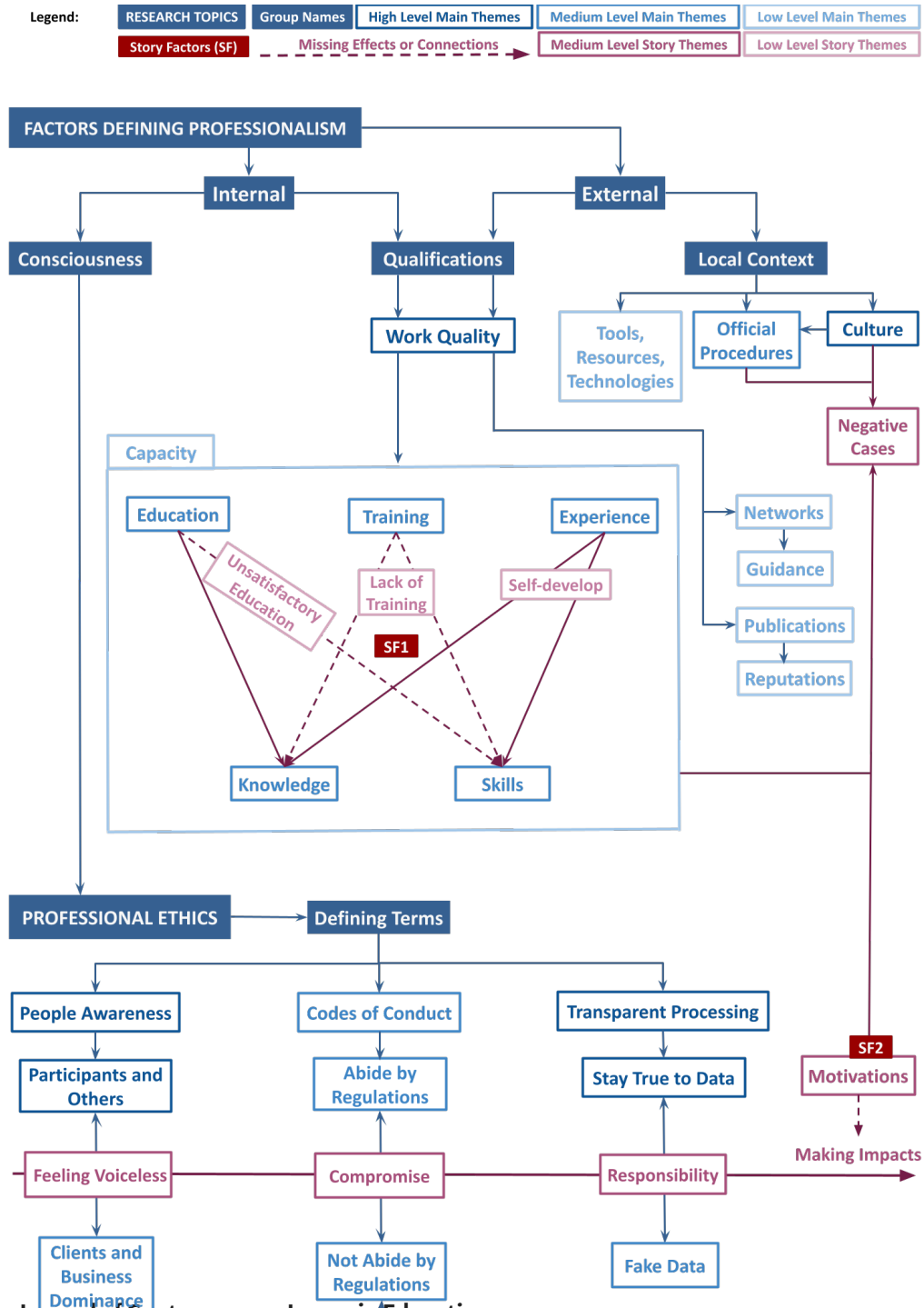
It is almost impossible to perform research without a prior personal relationship with local authorities. Despite partially demonstrating the Vietnamese's strong sense of community (Nguyen 2022; Vu, 2023), such bases on personal connections also implicitly provoke potential conflicts and concerns about ethics and misbehaviour (Tromme, 2016; Vu and Dall'Alba, 2011). Specifically, entanglements with local authorities affect the second contextual characteristic, which is local official procedures and mandatory research permits. These bureaucratic stages are

majorly controlled by the government and their relevant agencies (SR1) and regulate whether the research is allowed and how they will allow it (SR2, SR4, SR7). This evidently echoes the mentioned organizational professionalism in (one of) the local ways of evaluating performances (Evetts, 2003; Vu, 2023) as such procedures are overly demanding and harsh for outside research parties (SR2, SR4, SR7) while under-monitored for local businesses (SR3, SR5).

> Unless you have a relationship with state agencies or employees, like if you can call someone, [application] will be faster. It is like bureaucracy. (SR2)

> [My colleagues] already have permission from the local authority, but they will still deeply intervene with the research process. (SR7)

FIGURE 1. THE THEME MAP

Legend:
- RESEARCH TOPICS
- Group Names
- High Level Main Themes
- Medium Level Main Themes
- Low Level Main Themes
- Story Factors (SF)
- Missing Effects or Connections
- Medium Level Story Themes
- Low Level Story Themes

FACTORS DEFINING PROFESSIONALISM

Internal — External

Consciousness — Qualifications — Local Context

Work Quality

Tools, Resources, Technologies — Official Procedures — Culture

Negative Cases

Capacity

Education — Training — Experience

Unsatisfactory Education — Lack of Training — Self-develop

SF1

Networks — Guidance — Publications — Reputations

Knowledge — Skills

PROFESSIONAL ETHICS → Defining Terms

People Awareness — Codes of Conduct — Transparent Processing

Participants and Others — Abide by Regulations — Stay True to Data

SF2 — Motivations

Feeling Voiceless — Compromise — Responsibility

Making Impacts

Clients and Business Dominance — Not Abide by Regulations — Fake Data

Thirdly, as the available means to enable SRs to reach a certain working standard, the tools, resources, and technologies define professional environments and undeniably affect the corresponding performances of local SRs (SR1, SR3, SR5, SR6, SR7). This prompts another easily overlooked factor in forming and judging professionalism within any context, considering that most resources and technology are unevenly distributed globally and even locally (Oberle et al., 2019; Yee and Thompson-Schill, 2016).

> As for independent researchers and smaller research parties, they do not have the technology [to retrieve big data], which makes the collecting process almost impossible. (SR6)

As these characteristics contextualize the external conditions exerted upon SRs, they are largely beyond the local professional's control. Moving away from examining environments, the second external factor, specifically External Qualifications, marks how SRs can actively manage to meet their imposed expectations via expanding networks (SR1, SR4, SR5), guiding others (SR1, SR2, SR4, SR5, SR7), publications (SR2, SR4, SR6), and reputations (SR4, SR6). Achieving these results helps SRs to climb the professional ladder because external qualifications have always been the global standards signalling qualified expertise and professionalism for academic occupations (Costley et al., 2010; Scanlon, 2011), in which Vietnam is no exception (SR1 to SR6). Interestingly, despite playing a crucial factor in examining peers, when self-reflecting on their own journeys, all participants focused more on discussing how the SRs' internal competency impacts the work quality. Thus, external qualifications may be deceptive because they are perceived more as the symbolic flag of professionalism, while it is internal qualifications that dominate the identifying mechanism.

> Currently, in Vietnam, the expertise of a researcher is measured by the number of publications. That is something that I am not sure of because there

> are good researchers who rarely publish and others who publish regularly, but their quality is not very good. (SR4)

To distinguish the abilities of SRs, the first internal factor, or Internal Qualifications, presents six elements impacting their professional competency, which evidently resonates the local's partial portrayal of their SRs' personal-professional identities in learning, working, and living, thus fulfilling the existence of the first characteristic of modern professionalism locally (Costley et al., 2010; Scanlon, 2011). These include five internal qualifications, including education, training, experience, knowledge, and skills. Despite acknowledging the joint importance of education, training, and experience in aiding professional knowledge and skills, most local SRs still favour "following practical experiences" over "relying on local education and training" (SR1, SR2, SR4 to SR7), especially in developing needed skills. This evidently resonates with the proposition of learning from working, signalling the local gradual transition into modern professionalism (Evetts, 2003; McKee, 2012). Regardless, the most interesting element is the researchers' working capacity, representing a necessary yet neglected element in modern professionalism, especially in contrast with the rising demand for multitasking professionals (DeIuliis, 2024; Guiliano, 2020). Thus, the effects on work quality resulting from the mentioned five internal qualifications must inevitably be bounded by the SRs' capacity to navigate their simultaneous multi-responsibilities (SR1 to SR3).

> In short, [multitasking] could mean decentralized focus. Thus, we are more generalists than specialists. I think we have expertise in research to some extent but not fully nor deeply, which further creates capacity issues. (SR3)

Professional Ethics

As the second focus of this research, professional ethics was brought to the participants' attention during the discussions. However, before explicitly asking

questions about it, all SRs already touched on different aspects of professional ethics, positioning them as a necessary consciousness of good researchers. That evidence supports why this topic should fall under the current subsection as the second internal factor defining professionalism (Davey and Bredemeyer, 2011; Lee, 2011).

By not imposing a definition on the term, the questionnaire enabled SRs to express their perceptions and expectations of what constitutes ethical research. Generally, all participants emphasized the aspects of people's awareness, or sensitivity for others, and transparency besides abiding by codes of conduct, which significantly specify both the moral and altruism cores of professional ethics as the second characteristic of modern professionalism (Costley et al., 2010; Evetts, 2003). Firstly, despite having to represent some direct interests as crucial parts of their occupations and positions, usually from their clients and companies (SR1 to SR6), local SRs still highlighted how their research and actions always further echo other surrounding parties. To be aware of others means to treat these echoes with great care and serious consideration. To participants or local communities, it means accounting for their well-being and safety (SR2 to SR7). To co-workers, it means transparency in communication (SR3, SR5).

> Researchers can change the communities and people they work with to a certain extent. So, they need to be very careful with their statements, especially for those they need to protect. (SR4)

> The fact that you are transparent with what you do to your colleagues and stakeholders [is] a key indicator of professionalism to me. (SR3)

Next, besides being honest to others, research transparency also means integrity in handling the data and results regardless of their potential impacts on SRs' positions and benefits (SR3 to SR6). Most SRs used this aspect to highlight the

differences between domestic and foreign research mindsets (SR1 to SR5), where domestic research is more likely to be exposed to fixed outcomes (SR1, SR2), fake data (SR2, SR3, SR5, SR6), or higher possibilities of unwanted biased data (SR4, SR6).

> It does not matter how I do the research. The results still have to be exactly delivered as the customer requested. (SR1)

> [My colleagues from prestigious local institutes] hired someone to run the data and bought the ready-made data from somewhere. (SR3)

Lastly, SRs raised various cases of not abiding by research regulations or training at different research stages, including data collection (SR2 to SR5), processing (SR1, SR3), and interpretation (SR1, SR5, SR6). These issues seem to be partially connected to the local ambiguous standards and regulations (SR1, SR3 to SR7) and the corresponding hyper-adaptive and partially loose working styles (SR3 to SR6), evidently reinforcing the prior observation that local professionals have limited power in changing external regulations (Lee, 2021; Tromme, 2016).

> Regulations are usually flexible, and the company is always willing to come up with ways to circumvent the law and justify their actions. (SR1)

> When I started field research, I was also very aware of asking permission to record, but my mentor told me to stop asking for permission. (SR4)

A Preliminary Presentation of the Local Social Research Communal Hardships

The pink boxes in *Figure 1*, representing the Hardship Factors (HF) jointly present a preliminary inside perspective on the local community's hardships and

characteristics. Even though these themes are less helpful in generalizing and categorizing local professionalism, they instead supply details and layered depths for established perspectives. The Hardship Factors below combined explain the insinuated local situations of professional SRs in Vietnam and their consequences.

Unsatisfactory Education and Training

The theme map showcases that local SRs' preferences for working experiences partially resulted from their reported unsatisfactory education and lack of training, which is marked as HF1 in *Figure 1.* Resonating with existing propositions on inefficiencies in the local educational format (Nguyen and Vu, 2015; Scanlon, 2011; Tran *et al.,* 2016), local tertiary education mostly provides contextual knowledge without emphasizing the required skills (SR1, SR3 to SR7). Hence, the necessary social and communication skills (SR4, SR5), occasionally even analytical skills (SR1, SR3, SR6), majorly depend on SRs' personal efforts without much professional-systematic assistance (SR1, SR4 to SR6) such as training workshops (SR7) or official guidelines (SR2).

> [If] specific official instructions and training on paper then there are none. It's a bit like training on the job. (SR2)

> Not all of us have a [postgraduate degree] like me, some might not be equipped with even the most basic practice in research yet. (SR3)

On both micro and macro scales, that poses a significant challenge to the local SRs where the loop of unofficial and self-made procedures and instructions unnecessarily maintain convolution and inconsistency across local social studies and project execution (Vu, 2023; Vu and Dall'Alba, 2011), further exposing local professionals to the increasing lack of awareness (SR1 to SR6) and, thus, acceptance towards minor violations of regulations and injustices (SR1, SR3, SR4, SR5). To counter this, many SRs have actively sought self-development to improve their

professional competency (SR1, SR3 to SR7), provoking and inspiring a plausible solution in dealing with fixated dominations (Costley et al., 2010): equipping and enhancing personal and communal abilities to shield themselves and protect others under their care and responsibilities.

> I am curious how helpful it is to have a deeper and more specialised education on social research [...] as that is also my current consideration for personal development. (SR7)

> We are also seeking to do more training so that our members can get on board with more types of research knowledge and practice. (SR3)

A Lack of Motivation to Change

Continuing the prior discussion on self-developments of SRs, the pink scale called Making Impacts (*Figure 1*) presents the second hardship factor, which includes three levels of ethical grasp which measure SRs' motivations towards creating impacts and improvements on the local. This scale helps further address and represent the current internal reflexivity of local SRs on the dynamics between their professional powers and duties (Evetts, 2003; Scanlon, 2011).

All SRs confirmed their frustrations of feeling voiceless and unable to make changes in their corresponding working environments, resulting from dominations from their clients and businesses (SR1, SR2, SR5 to SR7) or from conflicts and concerns for others surrounding their research (SR3, SR4, SR6, SR7). Regarding the local bureaucratic and business culture (Pham and Hayden, 2019; Nguyen, 2023), these issues can only be acknowledged instead of being acted upon (SR1, SR2, SR4, SR7), marking their position as the first level of ethical grasp. The second level highlights an active middle-ground action of compromising requirements to ensure the best possible scenarios for most stakeholders (SR1 to SR7), which also implicitly reinforces a need to improve the currently loose and ambiguous

regulations, standards, and procedures locally (An and Dong, 2024; Tromme, 2016). The last level, in which feeling responsible as a local professional may encourage local SRs to initiate actions upon their long-term contextual hardships, is recognized by the least participants (SR3 to SR6) (Evetts, 2003; Scanlon, 2011).

> As an employee, it is difficult to make a change because I can only follow the company's requirements. (SR1)

> As an individual, I also made certain compromises because I am both a researcher and an employee. So, the way is to compromise different parties while trying to maintain ethics based on the available foundation. (SR5)

> A significant mindset that I have the opportunity to learn during a training course is being able to take a responsive view of my actions. I think that not only shows professionalism but also good personal development. (SR3)

The SRs' points of view have provided contextual evidence to further expand the current understanding and interpretation of modern professionalism. Specifically, the main mechanism driving local professional ethics is the researchers' selective motivations (SR3 to SR6). Differences in occupational titles and working environments, such as between researching businesses and NGOs, can alter SRs' motivations and their corresponding actions and decisions (Fomenky, 2015). For example, business researchers may have motivations to maintain data integrity and conduct quality research because the outcomes are always applied in production, thus exerting real consequences upon their positions and co-workers (SR3, SR5, SR6). NGOs and scholars on social programs may have motivations to instead care more deeply about how their actions affect the well-being and livelihood of their participants (SR4, SR6).

> The key thing is that we process [applied research] internally, which means we do not do it for clients, we do it for our business. (SR3)

> The collected information can destroy parts of a community if it is exposed. Whether to use it or not or how to use it, I guess I cannot formulate. (SR4)

Noteworthy, this motivation-selectivity might not be very far off from existing negative cases as it partially creates suitable conditions for normalizing and even encouraging different misbehaviours and violations (An and Dong, 2024; UNDP, 2015). Despite acknowledging existing corruption and even bearing its consequences (SR1 to SR4, SR7), local SRs are still reluctant to directly impact those situations because they only have direct motivations to fulfill their daily tasks while avoiding undertaking more risks. This risk aversion is maintained to the extent that the local SRs feel discouraged from improving their long-term working conditions or changing dominant and oppressive forces to protect their short-term benefits, including current job security(McMurran, 2002), justifying HF2 in the map. Thus, this looping mechanism gradually normalizes the wrongdoings by trapping local SRs in a structure that distracts them from their systematic hardships (Pham, 2015), consequently raising a problem that local SRs can neither shield themselves nor respond to the situations from their powerless positions. This issue undoubtedly raises the need to return some of the powers and authorizations to the local professionals, potentially via mechanisms such as whistleblowing (Ash, 2016) or those provoking the receptiveness of mass citizens (Nguyen et al., 2015; UNDP, 2015), which may safely enable SRs to perform more effectively.

Extended Discussions and Conclusion

Building on existing theories and interpretations of global modern professionalism and social research's educative characteristics at the beginning of this paper, the study has hitherto collected adequate evidence on the chosen profession (social research) within a neglected context (Vietnam) to cross-check and discuss the

current applicability of said literature and standpoints. Overall, via flexible qualitative data collection and analysis methods, this small-scale study has concluded a first-hand visual presentation on the professionalism and professional ethics of the social research community in Vietnam, using the perspectives and experiences of a preliminary and diverse part of that community. Importantly, the study also seeks to acknowledge the hardships and overlooked efforts of the local professionals by recognizing representative local perspectives on the SRs' ongoing efforts to achieve the best results while dealing with the contextual challenges and difficulties.

The findings suggest that the modern professionalism characteristics in existing academia are applicable as general frameworks for marginalized perspectives and a potential variety of occupations, supporting its cross-context suitability and its contemporary relevance. Specifically, academic and pragmatic requirements plus the moral and altruism cores are proven to be irreplaceable in deciding the professionalism of an expert. However, the study has also shown the limitations of such general frameworks and introduced several extensions, theories, and tools to address these limitations by further depicting, developing, and extending the modern emergence of professionalism from local perspectives.

Generally, the paper provides upcoming studies with a collection of comprehensive tools to address and interpret the professionalism of any local professions across both external aspects, including the local contextual culture, procedures, and resources and the significance of reputation in such contexts, and internal aspects, including education, training, and experiences in forming knowledge and skills and the three concluded attributions of professional ethics, including awareness of others, codes of conduct, and transparency. Contextual nuances and juxtapositions between the short- and long-term aims of the locals should be prioritized, especially when considering pragmatic solutions for local developments. In the case of SRs in Vietnam, it is important to place the above conclusions within the

country's historical trajectories, considering that many hardships currently met by local professionals emerged from a long period of complex historical developments and struggles against various colonialism forces (Nguyen, 2021; Tran et al., 2022). Despite SRs' recognizable efforts to grow without abandoning their traditional values (Nguyen, 2021; Nguyen, 2023), significant obstacles complicate their ongoing efforts to enhance personal-communal competencies with limited capacities and conflicts in balancing short-term duties and long-term improvements. More support and provision of satisfactory skill-based education and training is needed, such as from organizations, institutions, and companies, to ease the efforts and pressures faced by individuals. That also means designing and providing a safer mechanism to utilize the local neglected powers of individuals like whistleblowing and solutions involving raising mass awareness such as improving the educational system to encourage critical thinking rather than the current local mass education format (Nguyen and Vu, 2015; Tran et al., 2016).

By understanding the self-perceived standards and strategies of the social research community in Vietnam, we may understand a little bit more about how the local social experts can exert their educative influences on their local situation. The path towards aiding and changing the local educational systems, either directly or via introducing more nuances and perspectives, still stretches long. However, the paper proposes that it may help by starting with improving existing conditions and standards that the local professionals are currently facing, as suggested above. One may argue that standardized training should already be provided for experts in any field (Enders, 2005). Regardless, context has been concluded to be exceedingly important and the local context has shown that the powers to decide and facilitate social research focus lies in the hands of funders and government agencies rather than local academics with extensive training on relevant knowledge, skills, and ethics (Vu, 2023). Professionalism is thus an unstandardized benchmark that any occupation can strive towards in its own ways, and it is especially essential for people in contexts with various restrictions, where it may serve as a tool to

maintain academic integrity and social duties against the dominated government preferences for economic developments (Pham and Hayden, 2019; Vu, 2023), which are powerful factors shaping many activities in Vietnam.

Lastly, it is equally significant to discuss the study's limitations and drawbacks alongside all of its mentioned contributions to provide an accurate impression and clarification for readers of this paper. First, conducting research from a neutral position is impossible because any author's existing professional paradigm is inevitably influenced by their individuality and background (Mulcahy, 2011). The author's hybrid background, comprising both international and domestic training, explains the paper's adoption of the critical theory paradigm (Costley et al., 2010). This first limitation undoubtedly exerts personal biases upon the interpretations despite the efforts to use suitable means that prioritize the participants' perspectives. The second limitation is potential bias from the lack of cross-checking with other researchers in translating, collecting, coding, and interpreting this paper's research data, considering the priority for participants' privacy and safety. Thirdly, the sample could have been expanded to include other local social research divisions, such as public departments or strict academics, considering the paper's aim of providing an overview of the local social research community. Lastly, regarding the priority on participants' safety and welfare, the author accepts any residual drawback of the research and its outcomes. A dissemination of the anonymized results had been sent to participants, and no amendments were requested.

In conclusion, the research presents certain levels of reflexivity, transparency, awareness, and honesty regarding its findings' contributions and limitations along with the author's research position to justify and support its qualitative robustness, credibility, and reliability (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Regarding the lasting ambiguity in the concept of professionalism and its declining tendency and frequency in contemporary academia globally and locally, this paper serves as a

demonstration and proposal for a nuanced and effective way of tackling and portraying perspectives of developing countries by adapting suggestions and frameworks from developed countries while staying mindful of cultural appropriations (Bu, 2018). With the remarked justifications and necessary details in accurately addressing professionalism and professional ethics nowadays, it is reasonable to conclude that the local system for professional SRs in Vietnam still actively seeks changes to improve its competency. Thus, this study's portrayal of Vietnamese perspectives on SRs communal needs also imposes recognizable challenges when applying any Western theoretical models, structures, and ideologies locally. Most of the international involvement in local progress is heavily influenced by the lens of developed countries, considering their origins from these countries, which risk neglecting various local historical and contextual differences and resource gaps under the international gaze (UNDP, 2015). This study has demonstrated the necessity of insider perspectives, thus encouraging future applications of any existing social frameworks to pay significant attention to socio-cultural sensitivity rather than universal applications.

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