

# Psychological Difficulties of Psychology Students At Hanoi Metropolitan University During Internships: Current Situation and Recommendations

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**Abstract:** *This article aims to examine the psychological difficulties faced by psychology students at Hanoi Capital University during their internship. The study employs a mixed-methods approach with 50 students participating in quantitative surveys and 12 students in semi-structured interviews. The results indicate main challenges including: lack of self-confidence in applying knowledge, role conflicts during practice, insufficient support from supervisors, and prolonged stress symptoms. Quantitative analysis using Cronbach's Alpha, Pearson correlation, and Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) shows that the measurement scale has reliability and validity. Qualitative analysis provides deeper insights into the real psychological experiences of students, from which recommendations are made to improve training programs, enhance internship support, and develop an effective professional supervision system. The study contributes practical evidence for ensuring mental health and improving the quality of training for psychology students.*

**Keywords:** Psychology Internship, Psychology Students, Psychological Difficulties

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## 1. Introduction

Internship is one of the most important stages in the training process of Psychology students, playing a pivotal role in transforming theoretical knowledge into practical professional competence. Internships not only help students become familiar with professional working environments but also place them in direct contact with real psychological issues, where their skills, attitudes, and professional resilience are intensely challenged.

For Psychology students, internships are not merely about observing or practicing techniques; they are also a personal journey filled with emotions and inner challenges. Students face pressures related to their roles, expectations from supervisors and internship sites, as well as the stress of approaching and supporting clients effectively and ethically. This period is often when students experience personal crises, doubts about their professional abilities, and confront previously unfamiliar negative emotions.

At Hanoi Metropolitan University, the Psychology training program has made internships a compulsory component of the curriculum. Students are assigned to practice sites such as psychiatric hospitals, schools, and counseling centers, where they engage in assessment, therapy, counseling, and psychological support under the supervision of experts. However,

many students report feeling overwhelmed, unprepared, anxious when working with real clients, and lacking consistent guidance from supervising lecturers.

These difficulties not only affect internship outcomes but may also have long-term consequences for students' mental health and career orientation. Although some international studies have highlighted the prevalence of psychological difficulties during internships in helping professions (counseling, social work, psychology), in Vietnam—particularly within the context of applied psychology training—research literature remains limited.

Based on this reality, this article focuses on examining the psychological difficulties faced by second-year Psychology students at Hanoi Metropolitan University during their internships. Using a combination of quantitative data analysis and qualitative interview content, the study aims to provide practical insights that contribute to strengthening both theoretical foundations and practical approaches for adjusting training activities and supporting students in the future.

## 2. Content

### 2.1 Theoretical Basis

#### 2.1.1 The Theory of Stress and Psychological Adjustment by Lazarus and Folkman (1984)

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) developed a model of stress as a process of continuous cognitive appraisal and adjustment between the individual and the environment. According to this model, stress arises when a situation is perceived as exceeding the individual's coping capacity. This process involves two stages: (1) *primary appraisal* – when the individual determines whether the situation poses a threat, and (2) *secondary appraisal* – when the individual evaluates whether they have sufficient resources to cope. In the context of psychology internships, students are at high risk of experiencing stress, as they often appraise encounters with clients as “threatening” and feel a lack of skills, knowledge, or support to manage effectively.

Research by Glesne (2016) also indicates that student teachers and students in helping professions often experience higher levels of stress in practicum settings, particularly when support from supervisors and host institutions is insufficient.

#### 2.1.2 The Professional Development Model of Skovholt and Rønnestad (2003)

Skovholt and Rønnestad proposed a professional development model consisting of multiple stages, in which students and interns are categorized within the “*non-linear and vulnerable phase*.” At this stage, they often experience uncertainty, fluctuations in self-confidence, and a high degree of dependence on supervisors. Even a single negative response from a client or instructor may strongly affect their emotions and professional growth.

Factors such as lack of practical experience, role conflict (student versus practitioner), and fear of making mistakes frequently lead to anxiety and self-doubt. In addition, Skovholt (2012) emphasized the phenomenon of “*compassion fatigue*”—emotional exhaustion caused by excessive empathy—which often emerges early among psychology students who have not yet been equipped with adequate self-care skills.

#### 2.1.3 Role Theory and Role Conflict (Biddle, 1979)

Role Theory, developed by Biddle (1979), posits that each individual assumes multiple social roles, and inconsistent expectations from different stakeholders can lead to role conflict. In psychology internships, students simultaneously take on the roles of “learner,” “support staff,” and “representative of the training institution,” which can leave them feeling confused,

disoriented, and stressed. When these roles are incompatible (for instance, being required to make professional decisions while still lacking experience), students are more likely to experience stress or a decline in learning motivation.

#### **2.1.4 Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1977)**

Albert Bandura suggested that self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their ability to perform the actions required to achieve desired outcomes. In the context of internships, students with low self-efficacy often feel hesitant and anxious when facing practical tasks. They tend to underestimate their own abilities and are more vulnerable to negative influences from client or supervisor feedback. In contrast, students with high self-efficacy are usually more proactive in seeking support, willing to face challenges, and capable of learning from mistakes.

Bandura also emphasized the role of "*mastery experiences*"—the more effectively students handle real-life situations, the stronger their belief in their own competence becomes. Therefore, designing internships with gradually increasing levels of difficulty, combined with constructive and positive feedback, can help students develop self-efficacy in a sustainable manner.

#### **2.1.5 Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984)**

Kolb proposed that effective learning occurs when learners go through four stages: (1) concrete experience, (2) reflective observation, (3) abstract conceptualization, and (4) active experimentation. Internships provide an ideal setting for Psychology students to engage in this learning cycle. However, if opportunities for reflection (such as group discussions or reflective journals) are lacking, or if students are not guided in transforming their experiences into conceptual knowledge, the learning process may be disrupted.

Applying Kolb's model to internship training highlights the importance of organizing supportive activities such as group supervision, individual mentoring, and regular reflection sessions. These are key factors that help students not only perform tasks but also understand and grow from their experiences.

#### **2.1.6 Overview of Related Empirical Studies**

Shapiro et al. (2000), in a study conducted in the United States, found that 65% of counseling interns reported high levels of stress, with the most common causes being feelings of incompetence and lack of supervisory support. Similarly, See et al. (2010), in a study of 217 psychology students in Malaysia, revealed that internship-related stress levels were positively correlated with the frequency of encountering complex clinical situations and negatively correlated with the quality of supervision at the practicum site.

In Vietnam, research by Nguyễn Thị Minh Ngọc (2020) also showed that final-year Psychology students frequently worried about "not being able to help clients" and "misunderstanding clients' problems," particularly during internships at psychiatric hospitals or special education centers.

In summary, the above theoretical foundation underscores that factors such as perceived incompetence, role conflict, insufficient professional support, and stress from the practicum environment are predictors of the psychological difficulties faced by Psychology students during internships. These factors also constitute the central variables investigated and analyzed in this study.

Although these studies have provided an initial picture of the difficulties psychology students face during internships, several gaps remain. First, most research has focused on final-year students, while this paper investigates second-year students—a group at the initial stage of practicum exposure and particularly vulnerable to crises of competence. Second, few studies have employed mixed-method approaches to triangulate quantitative data with qualitative insights, which are essential for capturing both psychological manifestations and subjective experiences. Finally, previous research has primarily described difficulties without delving deeply into the relationships between contextual factors (e.g., lack of supervision, role conflict) and psychological manifestations as well as career orientation.

The novelty of this paper lies in: (1) examining second-year students at the beginning of practicum exposure; (2) adopting a mixed-method design that tests both statistical patterns and lived experiences; and (3) proposing a feasible framework for practicum supervision and support within the context of applied psychology training in Vietnam.

## 2.2 Research Methodology

The study employed a mixed-method approach to evaluate and analyze the psychological difficulties of Psychology students during their internships. The research sample consisted of 50 second-year students at Hanoi Metropolitan University, selected through convenience sampling. Quantitative data were collected using a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire (28 items) and processed with SPSS 26.0; qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with 12 students and analyzed using thematic analysis. The study adhered to ethical principles, ensuring voluntary participation, anonymity, and confidentiality of participants' information (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## 2.3 Research Findings

### 2.3.1 Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data were processed and analyzed using SPSS 26.0. First, descriptive statistics were conducted to identify response patterns and the prevalence of specific difficulties.

**Table 1: Descriptive statistics of some important variables**

Survey variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Percentage of “Agree” & “Completely Agree”
Q1. Worry when interacting with the host	3.98	0.72	74%
Q2. Difficulty applying theory into practice	3.85	0.81	68%
Q13. Lack of support from supervisors	3.76	0.79	60%

- The mean score for the item “*I feel anxious when interacting with clients*” (Q1) was 3.98 on a 5-point scale, with a standard deviation of 0.72, indicating a relatively high level of anxiety during internships.
- 68% of students reported having difficulties applying theoretical knowledge to practice (Q2), highlighting that the gap between theory and practice remains a common obstacle.
- Up to 60% of respondents indicated a lack of support from supervisors at practicum sites (Q13), which contributed to feelings of insufficient guidance in real professional settings.

**Table 2: Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of the scales**

Scale Group	Survey Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Professional Competence	Q1–Q6	0.81
Role Conflicts	Q7–Q12	0.79
Lack of Supervision and Support	Q13–Q18	0.83
Manifestation of Psychological Difficulties	Q19–Q24	0.86

Cronbach's Alpha reliability analysis was conducted for four main scale groups to examine the internal consistency of each factor:

- *Professional competence* (Q1–Q6):  $\alpha = 0.81$
- *Role conflict* (Q7–Q12):  $\alpha = 0.79$
- *Lack of supervision and support* (Q13–Q18):  $\alpha = 0.83$
- *Manifestations of psychological difficulties* (Q19–Q24):  $\alpha = 0.86$  All Alpha coefficients exceeded the threshold of 0.70, indicating high reliability of the scales and confirming their suitability for subsequent analyses.

**Table 3: Pearson correlation matrix between variables**

Variables	Lack of Supervision	Role Conflict	Difficulty Manifestation	Career Orientation
Lack of Supervision	1		<b>0.46**</b>	
Role Conflict		1		<b>0.51**</b>

\*\*p < 0.01

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships among variable groups:

- A moderate positive correlation was found between *Lack of supervision* and *Manifestations of psychological difficulties* ( $r = 0.46$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), indicating that the less support students received, the more they exhibited stress, anxiety, and exhaustion.
- A stronger correlation ( $r = 0.51$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) was observed between *Role conflict* and *Career orientation*, suggesting that ambiguity in roles may lead to crises of confidence and even intentions to withdraw from the profession.

**Table 4: Results of exploratory factor analysis (EFA)**

Evaluation Indicator	Value
KMO	0.812
Bartlett's Test (Sig.)	< 0.001
Number of Extracted Factors	5
Total Variance Explained (%)	67.4%

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted to examine the underlying structure of the questionnaire. Using Principal Component extraction with Varimax rotation, the results showed:

- KMO = 0.812 (indicating sample adequacy)
- Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ )
- Five factors were extracted with Eigenvalues > 1, explaining a total variance of 67.4%, consistent with the initial theoretical framework of five factor groups: professional competence, role conflict, lack of supervision, psychological manifestations, and career orientation.

The quantitative analysis provides clear statistical evidence of the relationships between difficulty-related factors and students' psychological responses, while also confirming that the measurement structure of the questionnaire is both reliable and valid within the research context (Nowell et al., 2017).

### 2.3.2 Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative analysis was conducted to gain deeper insights into students' perceptions, experiences, and emotions during their professional internships. Data were collected through 12 semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 35–45 minutes, which were recorded, coded, and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach (as cited in Nowell et al., 2017). Through inductive data coding, the study identified four main themes that reflect the core aspects of the psychological difficulties experienced by students.

#### **Theme 1: Lack of confidence and limitations in applying professional knowledge**

Many students reported feelings of confusion and low self-confidence when entering real professional settings. Although they had learned theoretical concepts, they struggled to apply them in specific situations, especially in conducting assessments, building counseling relationships, and choosing appropriate techniques. One student admitted: *"Although I studied the steps of assessment, when I was directly assigned to work with a real client, I felt very confused and did not know where to start."* The sense of "pure theory" and insufficient practice left many students anxious and doubtful about their own competence.

#### **Theme 2: Role conflict and career-related anxiety**

Students often faced ambiguity in their roles during internships—being both learners and expected practitioners at the same time. This conflict led to worries about meeting the expectations of practicum sites, fears of causing harm to clients, and stress from being evaluated. One student shared: *"I was excited to practice, but at the same time I felt scared because I didn't feel competent enough, yet I still had to provide counseling to clients."* Such emotions not only affected the effectiveness of the internship but also negatively influenced their long-term professional confidence.

#### **Theme 3: Lack of support and professional supervision during the internship**

Feedback from many students revealed that they often felt abandoned in the practicum environment when supervisors at the placement sites had limited time or lacked clear guidance strategies. This led to feelings of isolation, lack of direction, and increased stress. One student noted: *"There was a time I asked my supervisor about a situation, but he just said, 'Handle it yourself, just try and you'll figure it out.' I felt really lost."* The absence of proper supervision has been identified as a risk factor for both skill development and students' psychological well-being (Miller et al., 2021).

#### **Theme 4: Signs of stress and decreased motivation for learning**

Manifestations of practicum-related stress were clearly reflected in students' accounts: insomnia, prolonged anxiety, fatigue, irritability, and even signs of client avoidance or a reduced desire to pursue the profession. One student confessed: *"After the internship, I felt completely exhausted and didn't want to continue studying anymore."* These symptoms highlight the consequences of inadequate psychological preparation and lack of support during the practicum experience.

Overall, the qualitative findings deepen and complement the quantitative results, while establishing a strong connection between students' subjective experiences and the measured

factor groups. These outcomes strengthen both the content validity and ecological validity of the survey instrument, while also providing a practical basis for proposing psychological interventions and improvements in future training programs. Thematic analysis was chosen due to its flexibility and capacity to capture participants' lived experiences in depth, making it suitable for research in applied psychology (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In addition to the main themes presented, some students also shared self-regulation strategies they adopted to overcome challenges. One student reported: *"I kept a daily journal after each practicum session. It helped me process my emotions and stay calmer."* Others turned to peers in the same field for support and advice, highlighting the important role of peer support networks.

Notably, a few students practiced mindfulness meditation or deep-breathing techniques as a way to regulate emotions. Although not yet widespread, these strategies demonstrate the potential of short-term psychological interventions to enhance the mental health of practicum students.

Compared with international studies, Vietnamese students appeared less proactive in seeking support, influenced by cultural factors such as reluctance or fear of being judged as "incompetent." This was reflected in a student's remark: *"Many times I really wanted to ask, but I was afraid my teachers would think I wasn't capable enough."* This cultural difference is an important consideration in designing support programs tailored to the local context.

### **2.3.3 Discussion**

The research results show that second-year Psychology students at Hanoi Metropolitan University are facing multiple psychological difficulties during their internship, as reflected in both quantitative and qualitative data. These difficulties are not only individual manifestations but also reflect systemic issues in the training program, internship organization, and professional support.

First, the lack of confidence and anxiety in practice reveals a gap between theory and practice. Although students have acquired foundational knowledge, they still struggle to apply it in real situations due to limited experience in handling cases and insufficient application skills. This finding is consistent with Miller et al. (2021), who argue that psychology students need ongoing supervised exposure in order to transform knowledge into genuine professional competence. Second, the quantitative results indicate a correlation between role conflict and career orientation. This is a noteworthy factor, as ambiguity in roles can make students feel insecure, lose direction, and even consider leaving the field. This aligns with previous studies (Nguyen & Tran, 2020) on the impact of inconsistent roles on burnout and personal crises among students in human service disciplines.

Third, the lack of professional supervision is one of the greatest risk factors contributing to increased negative psychological manifestations. Both qualitative and quantitative results clearly demonstrate the impact of insufficient feedback, inadequate guidance, and weak connection with faculty supervisors or field practitioners. This highlights the need to develop a professional supervision system that is clear, consistent, and oriented toward supportive dialogue rather than evaluation (Miller et al., 2021).

Finally, the manifestations of stress and declining motivation indicate the long-term impact of internship experiences if no interventions are implemented. Negative experiences can affect students' learning motivation, commitment to the field, and professional confidence—foundational elements for developing high-quality human resources in psychology. This reality underscores the role of cultural context in internship experiences. In East Asian cultures such as Vietnam, students are often educated in a spirit of humility, respect for teachers, and avoidance of excessive self-expression. This may make them less proactive in sharing difficulties or requesting support, thereby increasing feelings of isolation during internships.

Compared with international studies, it can be seen that psychological difficulties in internship activities are a common issue for psychology students; however, the extent of the impact and the coping mechanisms vary significantly depending on each country and its cultural–educational context.

In South Korea, Bang and Park (2009) found that counseling and psychology students frequently experienced stress during practice, particularly when lacking professional support. To mitigate this pressure, a cyclical group supervision model was implemented, allowing students to share experiences, receive feedback from instructors and peers, and thereby enhance confidence and decision-making skills in practice.

In Japan, according to Shiratori et al. (2022), universities have developed on-campus mental health care programs, such as free psychological counseling, mindfulness rooms, and stress management classes. These interventions were designed as part of a learning support ecosystem and have had a positive impact on maintaining students' mental health, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Meanwhile, in Singapore, Wu (2018) pointed out that medical students (and health-related majors in general) often face great pressure from the internship environment. However, they tend to use individual coping strategies such as planning, seeking social support, or applying mindfulness techniques to regulate emotions. This reflects the flexibility in an educational culture that emphasizes the development of each student's self-efficacy.

These differences indicate that institutional context, investment in support systems, and cultural values significantly influence how psychology students experience and overcome difficulties during internships. Compared with countries that already have robust support systems, Vietnamese students still lack specialized professional supervision frameworks and are not adequately prepared with psychological coping skills. Therefore, this study contributes a more systematic and in-depth perspective on the experiences of second-year students—a group rarely examined—in order to propose adjustments to the psychology training program at Hanoi Metropolitan University to better align with Vietnam's practical context.

Thus, the study not only clarifies the current difficulties but also provides evidence for improving the practicum training program. A closer integration between theory and practice, strengthening the role of supervision, and establishing psychological support mechanisms during internships are necessary directions to enhance both the competence and mental well-being of psychology students.

### 3. Conclusion

The study has clarified the psychological difficulties faced by second-year psychology students at Hanoi Metropolitan University during their internships. By employing a mixed-method approach, both quantitative and qualitative results revealed prominent issues such as a lack of professional confidence, role conflict, insufficient professional supervision, and prolonged stress symptoms. These factors not only affect the internship process but also pose risks of negatively impacting students' long-term career orientation and mental health (Miller et al., 2021).

The research findings contribute practical evidence for the need to improve the psychology training program, emphasizing the importance of enhancing practice integrated with professional support, developing effective supervision mechanisms, and establishing psychological support systems for interns. This forms an essential foundation for improving training quality and ensuring the sustainable development of human resources in the field of psychology in the future.

In addition, the article proposes several specific recommendations:

- For lecturers: actively organize reflective activities, group professional supervision, and establish open communication channels to encourage students to share.
- For internship institutions: set clear agreements regarding students' roles, hold orientation sessions at the beginning of the term, and assign appropriate supervisors.
- For the university: develop a comprehensive mental health support system specifically for psychology students, which may include a support center, school counseling services, and a bank of simulated clinical cases for practice.

These solutions not only help students overcome difficulties but also contribute to building a solid foundation of professional competence and ethical values from the time they are still at university.

In addition to the specific recommendations mentioned above, the study also emphasizes the importance of developing more comprehensive policies to support interns. The university should implement policies to regularly assess students' psychological difficulties at different stages of their studies, especially during and after internships, in order to promptly introduce appropriate support measures. Establishing a school-based psychological support center is a feasible solution, enabling students to access professional counseling and support services directly on campus.

In terms of career development, organizing career orientation activities integrated with reflective practice can help students consolidate their personal direction, thereby reducing confusion and career uncertainty after difficult experiences. At the same time, the study recommends integrating modules on mental health care for psychology students themselves into the curriculum, as a proactive preparation for dealing with future professional pressures. In the future, further research could expand the sample size, compare students across different universities, or analyze specific internship settings (schools, hospitals, social service centers, etc.) to clearly identify the characteristics of each student group and thereby design more tailored support programs.

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## Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

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