A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF RESEARCH ON THE PSYCHOLOGICAL COUNSELING SKILLS OF COMPANY POLITICAL OFFICERS IN GRASSROOTS MILITARY UNITS

TỔNG QUAN NGHIÊN CỨU VỀ KỸ NĂNG TƯ VẤN TÂM LÝ CỦA CHÍNH TRỊ VIÊN ĐẠI ĐỘI Ở ĐƠN VỊ CƠ SỞ

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Abstract - A literature review of studies related to psychological counseling skills in the military was conducted to determine the theoretical basis, core skill groups, influencing factors, and measures for developing psychological counseling skills for company political officers at the grassroots level. The results indicate that existing research mainly focuses on four content groups: the nature and process of psychological counseling; the structure and manifestations of skills; influencing factors and measures for skill development. However, the majority of studies have been conducted in professional or academic counseling settings; direct research on the skills of company political officers remains limited, particularly lacking a skill model defined in accordance with their duties, authority, and the specific conditions of grassroots units. Consequently, the study identifies a suitable approach: viewing the psychological counseling skills of company political officers as an initial psychological support capability closely linked to understanding, managing, and orienting the ideological state of service members.

Key words - Psychological counseling skills; company political officers; grassroots military units.

Tóm tắt - Nghiên cứu tổng quan về các công trình liên quan đến kỹ năng tư vấn tâm lý trong quân đội, nhằm xác định cơ sở lý luận, các nhóm kỹ năng cốt lõi, yếu tố ảnh hưởng, biện pháp phát triển kỹ năng tư vấn tâm lý cho Chính trị viên đại đội ở đơn vị cơ sở. Kết quả cho thấy, các nghiên cứu tập trung vào bốn nhóm nội dung bản chất và tiến trình tư vấn tâm lý; cấu trúc và biểu hiện kỹ năng; các yếu tố ảnh hưởng và biện pháp phát triển kỹ năng. Tuy nhiên, phần lớn nghiên cứu được thực hiện trong lĩnh vực tư vấn chuyên nghiệp hoặc học đường; nghiên cứu trực tiếp về kỹ năng của Chính trị viên đại đội còn ít, đặc biệt thiếu mô hình kỹ năng được xác định theo chức trách, quyền hạn và điều kiện đặc thù của đơn vị cơ sở. Từ đó, nghiên cứu xác định hướng tiếp cận phù hợp là xem kỹ năng tư vấn tâm lý của Chính trị viên đại đội như năng lực hỗ trợ tâm lý bước đầu, gắn với nắm, quản lý và định hướng tư tưởng, cho bộ đội.

Từ khóa - Kỹ năng tư vấn tâm lý; chính trị viên đại đội; đơn vị cơ sở.

1. Introduction

The psychological counseling skills of company political officers in grassroots military units refer to the ability to comprehensively apply knowledge, experience, and helping communication methods to proactively detect, approach, listen to, and clarify problems, thereby supporting non-commissioned officers and soldiers in identifying psychological difficulties and independently selecting appropriate coping solutions. Psychological counseling activities are closely associated with the process of understanding, managing, and orienting service members' ideological states, but they focus on individual psychological difficulties and service members' capacity for self-directed problem solving. Therefore, they differ from ideological work, psychological support, psychological counseling, and psychological consultation/psychotherapy in the following respects.

First, they should be distinguished from ideological work. Ideological work is systematic in nature and includes understanding, forecasting, assessing, orienting, and struggling in the ideological domain in order to ensure consistency in ideological stance. By contrast, psychological counseling is an individualized helping method that focuses on resolving conflicts, emotional crises, and cognitive difficulties experienced by each service member. Psychological counseling serves as a "soft tool" that supports, deepens, and enhances the effectiveness of ideological work.

Second, they should be distinguished from psychological consultation and psychotherapy. Psychological consultation and psychotherapy are specialized clinical activities performed by deeply trained professionals for the purpose of diagnosing and treating mental disorders or psychological trauma. Company political officers perform their duties in a concurrent capacity within command-management relationships; therefore, they do not assume the role of psychotherapists.

Third, they should be positioned within initial psychological support and preliminary psychological counseling. The most appropriate scope of competence for company political officers is preliminary psychological counseling integrated into initial psychological support. Accordingly, the skills of political officers focus on: (1) early identification of abnormal signs; (2) establishment of trusting relationships based on empathy and an understanding of military culture; (3) listening, clarifying problems, and guiding service members to independently select coping solutions within the framework of discipline;

and (4) assessing the limits of their own competence in order to promptly refer cases to specialized personnel.

According to the Regulations on the Management of Service Members' Ideology, issued together with Decision No. 775/QD-CT dated May 12, 2022, ideological management includes understanding, forecasting, analyzing, assessing, resolving, orienting, struggling, and stabilizing the ideology of individual service members and military collectives. Therefore, the support activities carried out by political officers for service members should be placed within this system of responsibilities, rather than being equated with professional psychological consultation or psychotherapy [1].

In the existing literature, the concepts and skills of psychological counseling have been approached from various traditions. Rogers [2] emphasizes the helping relationship, empathy, acceptance, and genuineness; Ivey and Zalaquett [3] specify observable communication skills; Cormier and Hackney [4] - [6] adopt a helping-process approach; and Egan [7] emphasizes identifying the current state, defining goals, and developing action. In Vietnam, studies on school counseling and counseling in the military have addressed listening, understanding, encouragement, guidance, and support for problem solving [8] - [12]. However, these findings have not directly addressed the question of which skills are necessary and appropriate for a company-level political officer who provides psychological support in a concurrent capacity and within the framework of command and management relationships with service members. Thus, the research gap in this field lies not only in the limited number of studies directly examining company political officers, but also in the lack of clear demarcation of professional scope among professional psychological counseling, initial psychological support, and the work of understanding, managing, and orienting ideology. This gap means that the development of assessment criteria and skill-training programs for company political officers still lacks a sufficiently clear and integrated foundation.

The objective of this study is to systematize and analyze published works on psychological counseling and psychological counseling skills, thereby identifying research findings that can be inherited, points of divergence, and knowledge gaps as a basis for determining the structure of psychological counseling skills appropriate to the responsibilities of company political officers in grassroots military units. The study focuses on answering four questions: What perspectives, structures, and processes do existing studies use to approach psychological counseling activities and psychological counseling skills? What factors have been identified as being related to the formation and development of psychological counseling skills? What measures or models have been proposed to develop counseling and psychological support skills in comparable contexts? Which findings can be transferred to company political officers, and which gaps need to be directly examined in the context of grassroots units of the Vietnam People's Army?

In this article, "psychological counseling" is used as a term denoting a purposeful helping activity based on direct interaction between the helper and the service member, with the aim of helping the service member identify difficulties, clarify cognitions and emotions, consider possible options, and actively choose appropriate coping strategies [2], [7], [8]. This term should be distinguished from "psychological consultation" in the sense of a specialized profession, and from "psychotherapy", which refers to specialized intervention for disorders or problems requiring treatment. "Psychological support" is understood more broadly, including initial actions that help service members reduce stress, enhance adaptability, mobilize resources, and access appropriate assistance. Within the scope of the responsibilities of company political officers, psychological counseling skills are not defined as the capacity to diagnose, treat, or manage mental disorders. The appropriate scope includes early detection of signs of difficulty; establishment of trusting relationships; listening and clarifying problems; supporting service members in identifying resources; providing information and orienting choices within the limits of assigned responsibilities; and monitoring, coordinating, and making referrals when problems exceed the capacity of initial support. This distinction also helps avoid equating counseling skills with ideological work skills. Ideological work has a broader scope and includes understanding, forecasting, analyzing, assessing, resolving, orienting, struggling, and stabilizing the ideology of individual service members and military collectives [1]. Psychological counseling is a specific helping method in which the focus of interaction is on psychological difficulties and service members' capacity for self-directed problem solving. The two domains intersect but are not identical in terms of objectives, content, and professional boundaries.

2. Research methods

The study was designed as a systematic literature review with narrative synthesis. This approach was selected due to the heterogeneous nature of the source materials, which included monographs, scientific articles, research projects, dissertations/theses, and guidance documents, with different objectives, subjects, and methods. Therefore, a meta-analysis was not conducted. The reporting process was structured according to the main components of PRISMA 2020, particularly the identification of selection criteria, information sources, search strategy, screening process, quality appraisal, and presentation of the flow of document selection [13].

2.1. Information sources and search strategy

The literature search and collection process was conducted from January 2024 to June 2024, covering works published between 1951 and 2026.

The search strategy involved collecting materials from two groups of sources: (1) open-access electronic databases and citation systems, including Google Scholar and VCI; and (2) digital libraries and internal databases of military institutes and academies, including the Political Academy, the National Defense Academy, the National Defense Journal, and the Journal of Military Science Research.

The search syntax combined Vietnamese and English keywords using Boolean operators:

Keyword set 1, concerning subjects/context: "chính trị

viên" or "chính trị viên đại đội" or "quân đội" or "đơn vị cơ sở".

Keyword set 2, concerning content/competence: "tư vấn tâm lý" or "kỹ năng tư vấn tâm lý" or "hỗ trợ tâm lý" or "công tác tư tưởng" or "psychological counseling" or "counseling skills" or "mental health support".

Combined syntax: [Keyword set 1] and [Keyword set 2].

2.2. Criteria for inclusion and exclusion of documents

The inclusion criteria were as follows:

- Scientific articles, books/monographs, research projects, theses/dissertations, or official documents with content directly related to counseling or psychological support in relevant contexts.

- Studies on the structure, manifestations, influencing factors, training, or measures for improving counseling/ psychological support skills.

- Studies directly examining political officers, service members, or occupational groups with similar psychological support functions, such as teachers and educational staff.

- Sources that provide sufficiently clear descriptions of concepts, subjects, content, or methods to support coding and synthesis.

The exclusion criteria were as follows:

- Commentaries, personal experience-sharing articles, or materials without a clear scientific basis.

- Documents with duplicate content, or incomplete conference proceedings abstracts that did not provide sufficient information for content appraisal.

- Materials that mentioned mental health only but did not provide information usable for the research questions concerning support/counseling or skills.

- Sources whose origin could not be identified or whose full text could not be verified.

2.3. Screening and data collection process

Duplicate records were processed as follows. After 45 initial records had been collected from the data sources, the list was imported into citation management software, EndNote X9, to automatically filter duplicate documents based on title, author, and year of publication. A manual review was then conducted for records with similar titles or content. Duplicate records were removed, leaving 32 unique documents.

The screening process consisted of two steps:

Step 1, preliminary screening: the titles and abstracts of the 32 documents were reviewed according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Step 2, full-text appraisal: the full texts of these 32 documents were reviewed. Seven documents were excluded because they did not provide sufficient methodological information, were only brief specialized experience reports, or duplicated research findings. Finally, 25 documents were formally included in the main analysis and synthesis.

The document selection flow, structured according to PRISMA 2020, was as follows: 45 documents identified → 32 documents screened by title/abstract → 32 documents assessed in full text → 7 documents excluded → 25 documents included in the main synthesis.

Table 1. *Summary of the search and document selection process*

Stage	Number	Processing content
Identification of initial documents	45	Documents obtained from databases, digital libraries, and supplementary search sources.
Title and abstract screening	32	Documents not relevant to the topic and research questions were excluded.
Full-text appraisal	32	Documents were checked against the selection criteria, conceptual scope, and completeness of methodological information.
Excluded after full-text appraisal	7	Documents did not fully meet the criteria regarding relevance, methodological information, or usability for synthesis.
Included in the main synthesis	25	Documents were coded and analyzed according to the four research questions.

2.4. Quality appraisal and reliability of sources

Quality appraisal was conducted at two levels in order to avoid applying a single standard to different types of sources. For empirical studies, the focus was on the clarity of the research question/objective, description of subjects and data, appropriateness of methods, transparency of analysis, and consistency between conclusions and data. For books/monographs and official documents, the focus was on the authority of the source, the clarity of the conceptual framework, and the capacity to provide a basis for identifying functions or principles of support. A document was used to formulate conclusions on a given issue only when it met minimum requirements for reliability and relevance. The detailed results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. *Summary of quality appraisal of source materials*

Appraisal group	Main criteria	Use in the synthesis
Empirical studies	Clear objectives; clear subjects/data; appropriate methods; transparent analysis; conclusions consistent with data.	Prioritized as a basis for conclusions regarding manifestations, influencing factors, and the effectiveness of measures.
Theoretical studies/ monographs	Clear conceptual framework; authoritative authors/ publishers; consistent arguments.	Used to develop and compare models, skill domains, and counseling processes.
Regulations and organizational documents	Official sources; clearly identify responsibilities, processes, or organizational models.	Used to determine the scope of responsibilities and conditions of application in military settings.

Each document was coded according to the following categories: author/year; type of source; research context; subject; objective; theoretical framework; skill domains; influencing factors; development measures; and degree of relevance to the responsibilities of company political officers. After coding, the results were grouped along four axes: (1) the nature and process of psychological counseling; (2) the structure and manifestations of skills; (3) influencing factors; and (4) measures for skill development. Narrative synthesis was used to compare similarities, differences, the directness of evidence, and the transferability of findings to the context of grassroots units of the Vietnam People's Army.

3. Research results

To provide detailed evidence and meet the requirement for in-depth analysis, representative studies among the 25 documents are systematized in Table 3 below.

Table 3. *Summary of major studies on counseling and psychological support skills*

Author (Year)	Context / Subjects	Approach / Model	Main Findings & Core Skills	Transferability to Company Political Officers
C. Rogers [2]	Clinical psychological counseling / Civilian context	Client-centered counseling theory	Emphasizes three factors: empathy, unconditional positive regard, and genuineness.	Provides a foundation for trust-building and listening skills, but does not offer a sufficiently specific process.
A. E. Ivey & M. J. Zalaquett [3]	Multicultural counseling / Civilian context	Microskills approach	Specifies communication skills: attending, questioning, responding, paraphrasing, and summarizing.	Applicable to the training of observable behaviors for political officers.
G. Egan [7]	Psychological helping / Civilian context	"The Skilled Helper" model, three stages	Emphasizes three groups of skills: recognizing the situation, identifying goals, and developing action plans.	Suitable for the process of orienting soldiers toward resolving difficulties.
U.S. Army, ATP 6-22.1 [17]	Military / Commanding officers and subordinates	Leadership counseling process	Active listening, responding, and open-ended questioning; requires a specialized referral mechanism.	Highly similar in terms of command context; listening skills and referral procedures can be transferred.
C. W. Hoge et al. [14]	U.S. military / Combat soldiers	Military mental health	Identifies risks of stress and PTSD; emphasizes the need for an initial psychological support system.	Provides a theoretical basis for the need to support service members psychologically.
J. R. Bleiberg et al. [21]	Military / Non-military counselors	Military cultural gap	Cultural barriers and service members' defensiveness; effective listening requires understanding military terminology and hierarchy.	Political officers have the advantage of understanding unit culture but need skills to reduce defensive barriers.
Dang Duy Thai [16]	Vietnam People's Army / Non-commissioned officers and soldiers	Quality of psychological counseling activities	Proposes measures for understanding ideology, organizing "psychological and legal counseling teams", and peer counseling.	Directly relevant to grassroots units of the Vietnam People's Army.
Cao Xuan Trung [12]	Vietnam People's Army / Political officer cadets	Training psychological consultation skills	Identifies skills such as listening, understanding, sharing, guiding, and encouraging.	An important basis for developing a skill framework for company political officers.
Nguyen Van Bac [9]	School context / Teachers and management staff	School counseling skill framework	Examines the current situation, influencing factors, and measures for scenario-based training.	Provides reference value for methods of training skills for personnel performing concurrent duties.

3.1. Studies on psychological counseling activities

Psychological counseling activities were formed and developed along with the emergence of applied psychology, particularly counseling psychology and psychotherapy in the twentieth century. Psychological counseling is a distinctive activity and a process of interaction between the counselor and the counselee. In this process, the counseling subject uses appropriate psychological knowledge, experience, and methods to support and help the counselee identify difficulties, regulate cognitions, emotions, and behaviors, improve the ability to adapt to the demands of the living environment, and select meaningful problem-solving options that are suitable to their own capabilities.

C. Rogers places emphasis on the quality of the helping relationship, in which empathy, positive regard, and genuineness create conditions for the counselee to develop self-awareness and change [2]. Meanwhile, Egan develops a problem-solving approach, emphasizing clarification of the current situation, goal identification, and action development [7]. This perspective deepens the understanding of psychological counseling, which is not limited to emotional support but also aims to improve the counselee's adaptability and capacity for self-directed problem solving. Ivey and Zalaquett [3] specify the interaction process into communication skills such as attending, questioning, responding, paraphrasing, and summarizing. Cormier and Hackney [4] - [6] approach counseling as a structured process, from relationship establishment and information collection to problem identification, intervention, and evaluation.

In military settings, foreign authors approach psychological counseling for service members mainly by focusing on mental health issues, psychological difficulties, adaptability in the military environment, and service members' psychological resilience. Hoge et al., in their study of U.S. service members who participated in combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, clearly indicated that combat activities could increase the risk of mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and psychological disorders, and emphasized the necessity of care, support, and psychological intervention programs in the military [14]. Meanwhile, Reivich, Seligman, and McBride, through their study on resilience training in the U.S. Army, affirmed the role of developing personal resources, coping capacity, and support from the unit environment in helping service members overcome pressure, maintain a positive psychological state, and complete their assigned tasks [15].

Dang Duy Thai, in Improving the Quality of Psychological Counseling for Non-Commissioned Officers and Soldiers in Grassroots Units in the Military Currently [16], provides an in-depth discussion of psychological counseling for non-commissioned officers and soldiers in grassroots military units today. The author conceptualizes the quality of psychological counseling as the combined value of the elements constituting counseling activities, assessed by the extent to which psychological difficulties and stress are resolved and psychological

balance is maintained among non-commissioned officers and soldiers in the process of performing their responsibilities and duties.

Notably, psychological counseling activities in the Vietnam People's Army have contents and methods of implementation reflected in the *Regulations on the Management of Service Members' Ideology; Grasping and Orienting Public Opinion in the Vietnam People's Army* [1], as well as in the model of the "Psychological and Legal Counseling Team".

In general, domestic and foreign studies on psychological counseling activities in general, and psychological counseling in military settings in particular, show that counseling is not merely an act of "giving advice". Its focus lies in the interactive process that helps counselees understand their problems, mobilize resources, and participate in selecting solutions. However, differences exist in the degree to which the counseling process is structured and the extent of specialization of the helper. This is an important point when transferring counseling skills to company political officers: professional counseling models should not be applied mechanically; rather, a version of skills appropriate to the initial support role should be identified.

3.2. Studies related to the psychological counseling skills of company political officers in grassroots military units

Psychological counseling skills constitute a central content area in research on psychological counseling, reflecting the subject's capacity to apply knowledge, experience, and modes of action in the process of interacting with and helping the counselee. There are various research directions concerning psychological counseling skills. Within the scope of this article, the review is conducted along three basic directions: the structure and manifestations of skills; factors influencing skills; and measures for improving psychological counseling skills.

3.2.1. Studies on the structure and manifestations of psychological counseling skills

In *Client-Centered Therapy: Its Current Practice, Implications, and Theory*, C. Rogers clearly states that the counselor needs to be able to understand the psychological world of the counselee, maintain an attitude of positive regard, and demonstrate genuineness in the interaction process [2]. This perspective lays the foundation for identifying the manifestations of psychological counseling skills among company political officers, including listening skills, understanding skills, and relationship-building skills.

Developing a more specific skill-based approach, Ivey and Zalaquett argue that psychological counseling is a purposeful communication process in which the counselor needs to use communication skills such as attending, questioning, responding, paraphrasing, summarizing, and providing information to help counselees explore their own problems [3]. The outstanding feature of this approach is that it specifies counseling skills into behaviors that can be observed, assessed, and trained. Meanwhile, Cormier and Hackney approach counseling skills from the perspective of helping strategies, arguing that counselors need to develop a system of skills including relationship establishment, information collection, problem identification, selection of intervention methods, and evaluation of helping outcomes [3] - [5].

From a problem-solving perspective, Egan developed "The Skilled Helper" model, which emphasizes three basic skill groups: helping counselees clearly perceive their current situation, identify desired goals, and develop action plans to achieve change [7]. Thus, this perspective shows that psychological counseling skills are not limited to listening and sharing, but also include skills in orientation, eliciting resources, and supporting counselees in actively resolving their problems.

The U.S. Army's ATP 6-22.1 handbook, *The Counseling Process* [17], defines counseling as a regular leadership responsibility, associated with performance assessment and professional development of subordinates, rather than as a form of psychotherapy. The three foundational skills emphasized are active listening, including attention to body language, eye contact, and summarizing to confirm understanding; responding, including paraphrasing and clarifying the counselee's message; and asking appropriate open-ended questions while avoiding turning the conversation into an interrogation. The document also explicitly acknowledges the limits of non-specialist leaders: when a problem exceeds their capacity to handle it, "referral" to more specialized resources is a mandatory part of the process.

In Vietnam, studies on psychological counseling skills also focus on identifying the foundational skills of counselors. Kien Van and Ly Chu Hung, in *School Psychological Counseling* [10], discuss skills for understanding the counselee, including listening skills, closed- and open-ended questioning skills, encouragement skills, paraphrasing skills, emotional reflection skills, and generalization skills. Nguyen Tho Sinh, in *Basic Psychological Counseling* [11], identifies several types of psychological counseling, such as mental health counseling, marriage counseling, family counseling, career counseling, and school counseling. The author also argues that counselors need several skills, such as persuasion, empathy, sharing, timeliness, humor, and contracting skills. These are important skills that help counselees gain a new perspective on their lives, develop new ways of thinking and new emotions, and thereby achieve healthier and more positive behaviors. These skills can be used in counseling to help counselees become more aware of themselves and their problems, and improve their personal capacity to resolve the difficulties they are facing. In research conducted in military settings, Cao Xuan Trung, in *Training Psychological Consultation Skills for Platoon-Level Political Officer Cadets* [12], provides an in-depth discussion of psychological consultation skills, including listening, understanding, sharing, guiding, and encouraging.

Analysis of the studies shows that counseling skills are described along two complementary directions. The first direction emphasizes relational and communication skills, including relationship establishment, listening, empathy, questioning, and responding [2], [3], [10], [11]. The second

direction emphasizes process-based problem-solving skills, including information collection, problem identification, goal identification, option selection, action support, and outcome evaluation [4] - [7]. Comparison of these approaches indicates that if counseling skills are defined only through communication behaviors, the outcomes of the helping process are not fully reflected. Conversely, if they are described only according to problem-solving steps, the relational conditions that create safety and openness may be overlooked. Therefore, for company political officers, the skill structure should combine both "interaction skills" and "process skills". On the basis of synthesis, these can be grouped into five categories: (1) establishing relationships and building trust; (2) listening, observing, and questioning; (3) understanding, responding, and clarifying problems; (4) providing information, orienting, and supporting choice; and (5) monitoring, coordinating, and referring when necessary.

3.2.2. Studies on factors influencing psychological counseling skills

In addition to examining the structure and manifestations of psychological counseling skills, studies have also focused on clarifying the factors influencing the formation and development of counselors' psychological counseling skills. These studies generally agree that psychological counseling skills do not form spontaneously, but are the result of the combined influence of knowledge, personal qualities, practical experience, the operating environment, and the process of training and practice.

Specifically, C. E. Hill, in *Helping Skills: Facilitating Exploration, Insight, and Action* [18], argues that psychological helping skills are not formed merely through the acquisition of theoretical knowledge, but are developed through training, practice, and regular feedback. According to the author, the level of skill development of helpers is influenced by the quality of training, opportunities to practice specific situations, professional guidance, and the individual's capacity for self-regulation during the training process. Meanwhile, G. Corey [19] argues that an individual's psychological counseling skills are influenced by the combination of knowledge background, self-awareness, professional qualities, and the ability to flexibly apply helping methods in practice. These are important bases for indicating that the psychological counseling skills of company political officers are influenced by such factors as cognitive level, personal qualities, training and professional development, work experience, and the officers' own self-training process.

Britt, Adler, and Castro, in their study of the psychological life of service members under peacetime and combat conditions, point out the complexity of psychological and social factors in the military environment. The authors focus on analyzing issues related to stress in military activities, adaptability and psychological resilience, social support, morale and unit cohesion, the role of leadership, service members' families, and military culture. These factors constitute the direct context that governs psychological support activities for service members. From the authors' approach, it can be seen that the formation and application of psychological counseling skills in military settings are simultaneously affected by factors related to the counselor as an individual, knowledge and experience of military psychology, the ability to recognize and handle stress reactions, relationships and social support within the unit, as well as the family characteristics and military culture of the counselee [20]. Therefore, developing psychological counseling skills for company political officers requires linking professional knowledge and skill training with practical experience and a deep understanding of the military operating environment.

The empirical study by J. R. Bleiberg et al. [21], which analyzes the military cultural gap, demonstrates that a lack of practical experience with military life is a direct barrier that reduces the effectiveness of counselors' listening and empathy skills, causing service members to become more defensive. The military has its own system of terminology, abbreviations, and ways of thinking and acting. If counselors do not understand these specific signs, hierarchies, and forms of language, they will fail at the very stage of listening and information collection. Service members will immediately erect defensive barriers because they believe that "this person does not belong to my world" and "cannot understand my pressure". Military culture trains service members in self-reliance, endurance, and the belief that revealing mental weakness is a "failure" or a "violation of discipline". Therefore, ordinary empathy and elicitation skills may be rendered ineffective if counselors apply them mechanically as they would in civilian contexts. The study demonstrates that the level of mastery of psychological counseling skills depends not only on the number of years of general counseling experience, but is also decisively influenced by the helper's level of understanding of the structure, pressures, and lifestyle of the military.

Along the same line of research as J. R. Bleiberg, the classic study by J. E. Coll et al. [22] in the clinical handbook on military culture indicates that the military environment, with its discipline and strict hierarchy, implicitly creates in service members a natural defensive tendency and a psychological avoidance of seeking help due to fear of being judged in terms of resilience or courage. To break down this defensive tendency, the counselor's skills must change: the approach should not be one of "diagnosing illness", nor should it rely on dry questionnaires. Instead, counseling should be integrated into natural daily interactions, proactively building trust on the basis of sharing hardship with service members.

Nguyen Van Bac et al. [23], in their study assessing the current status of school psychological counseling skills among staff and teachers at several high schools in Quang Tri and Thua Thien Hue provinces, evaluate the influence of several factors on school psychological counseling skills. These factors include professional standards requirements; knowledge of psychological counseling in schools; teachers' teaching and educational experience; teachers' aptitude; teachers' confidence; the extent of and opportunities for training and professional development in counseling; the environment, such as facilities, for conducting counseling work; policies, regulations, and guidance documents issued

by Departments and Divisions of Education and Training and schools; the level of financial support; and coordination among forces inside and outside the school.

Hoang Gia Trang [24] identifies several factors affecting the psychological counseling skills of homeroom teachers, including the attention of educational management staff; training in psychological counseling skills for homeroom teachers; the enthusiasm and interest of homeroom teachers; and the values and attitudes of homeroom teachers.

The above review indicates that psychological counseling skills are directly governed by many different factors. For political officers in grassroots units, these factors can be divided into three groups: personal factors of the political officer, including knowledge, experience, qualities, and self-awareness; training and practice factors, including opportunities for practice, feedback, and simulated situations; and organizational-environmental factors, including military culture, hierarchical relationships, coordination mechanisms, and professional resources. This provides a basis for developing a model of influencing factors in subsequent research.

3.2.3. Studies on measures to improve psychological counseling skills

In the Australian Defence Force document [25], measures to improve counseling and psychological support skills are integrated through strategic objectives. First, psychological management capacity is established as a leadership standard. This strategy requires that training in skills for identifying, counseling, and providing initial psychological support should not be reserved only for doctors or specialists, but must be a mandatory task of commanders. Managing officers must be equipped with the capacity to normalize psychological conversations in order to break down service members' defensive barriers.

Second, a multi-level screening and connection network is developed. To improve counseling effectiveness, the document proposes periodic screening and screening after stressful missions. The measure here is to train commanding officers to use preliminary screening results to proactively approach and provide early counseling before psychological crises occur, rather than waiting for soldiers to seek help on their own.

Third, support tools for commanders are standardized and synchronized. The ADF establishes information portals and standardized procedures. The specific measure is to train officers in how to connect service members' needs with specialized resources, thereby turning commanders into "coordinating counselors" who provide preliminary counseling and then transfer cases to subsequent support levels in a scientific manner.

S. E. Hodson and A. B. Ross offer a highly practice-oriented perspective by regarding mental health as a "weapon system" [26]. If weapons require technical maintenance, then soldiers' mental states also require psychological maintenance. Measures to improve counseling and psychological relief skills focus on the following aspects.

First, removing inferiority-related barriers is a prerequisite for successful counseling. The study indicates that the greatest barrier causing soldiers to refuse counseling is the fear of being seen as weak or of having their careers affected. Therefore, the key measure for improving counseling effectiveness is that commanders must change unit perceptions: psychological difficulties should be regarded as objective injuries caused by the distinctive military environment, rather than as personal shortcomings.

Second, training in "peer psychological crisis intervention skills" is emphasized. The study stresses that young soldiers tend to confide in peers of the same rank before reporting to commanders. The measure for capacity improvement here is to popularize active listening skills and skills for identifying signs of depression and anxiety among non-commissioned officers and exemplary soldiers, thereby creating a network of counselors embedded in each squad.

Third, a mechanism for "psychological recovery" after combat or high-intensity training is proposed. The document recommends mandatory group counseling procedures after exercises or long-term missions at sea, in remote areas, or in isolated areas. At this point, the officer's skill lies in facilitating after-action reviews not only in terms of tactics and techniques, but also in terms of emotions, allowing service members to express psychological pressure in a safe and non-judgmental space.

Nguyen Van Bac [9], in the study *School Psychological Counseling Skills of Staff and Teachers in General Education Schools*, argues that improving psychological counseling skills for staff and teachers requires the effective implementation of measures such as organizing activities to improve knowledge and skills in school psychological counseling; providing knowledge about the psychological difficulties currently faced by students; organizing practice in the process and steps of school psychological counseling; organizing exchanges on situations in psychological counseling activities to develop school psychological counseling skills; and coordinating with experts and psychological counseling centers outside schools to support staff and teachers in psychological counseling skills.

In the same research direction on school psychological counseling skills, Nguyen Thien Nga [27] argues that psychological counseling skills for teachers can be improved through measures such as: (1) strengthening the training of school psychology knowledge for teachers. Schools and specialized agencies need to develop regular and systematic training plans on age psychology, characteristics of student personality development, and methods for identifying and handling common psychological problems. In addition to traditional training formats, information technology should be applied in training through online courses, thematic seminars, or experience-sharing forums between psychological experts and teachers; (2) training counseling and psychological communication skills for teachers in practical work. Schools can coordinate with psychological experts to organize guidance sessions and situation-handling practice, helping teachers learn how to listen, understand,

ask open-ended questions, and provide appropriate psychological orientation for students; and (3) establishing a regular support mechanism so that teachers can receive consultation and share difficulties during task performance. When counseling and communication skills are improved, teachers will become more confident in supporting students, contributing to the formation of a friendly, safe, and positive school environment.

In the research project *Improving the Quality of Psychological Counseling for Non-Commissioned Officers and Soldiers in Grassroots Units in the Military Currently*, Dang Duy Thai [16] proposes measures to improve psychological counseling skills for cadres in grassroots units that are suitable to the characteristics of the military environment. These include: (1) improving the capacity of grassroots-level cadres in "understanding, managing, and resolving ideology"; (2) diversifying forms of psychological counseling. In addition to private meetings, the study proposes indirect counseling measures such as establishing "confidential mailboxes", organizing forums, youth dialogues, thematic activities on life skills, and collective emotion management; and (3) promoting the role of "psychological and legal counseling teams". This includes organizing training in group consultation skills for team members and using the "peer" method, in which experienced soldiers counsel and share experience with new soldiers, in order to reduce generational and rank distance and make psychological relief occur more naturally.

Dinh Tuan Hung, in the work *The Issue of Psychological Counseling in the Vietnam People's Army* [28], proposes four measures to develop psychological counseling skills for political cadres in the military: regularly improving knowledge in all areas, especially knowledge of psychological counseling; supplementing experience and life knowledge through practical activities; enhancing responsibility, proactiveness, and positivity in professional activities; and improving personal prestige.

Hoang The Hai and Le Quang Son, in the article *Results of Implementing the Training Model on Psychological Counseling Skills for Homeroom Teachers at Junior High Schools in Kien Giang Province* [29], present the results of an experimental evaluation of the application of a psychological counseling skill training model for 182 lower-secondary school homeroom teachers. The study clarifies improvements in professional knowledge and practical counseling skills, such as listening, empathy, and orientation toward resolving school-related difficulties, among teachers after training.

The reviewed studies suggest methods for improving counseling skills through practical training in handling clinical situations, application of technology, and establishment of multi-level peer counseling networks at the grassroots level. From these findings, the article draws the core point that improving psychological counseling skills for company political officers should include measures such as training in foundational psychological knowledge, scenario-based skill training, feedback practice, recognition of limits of competence, and coordination/referral mechanisms.

4. Discussion

The synthesis results show that the "psychological counseling skills of company political officers" cannot be equated with the entire skill system of professional counselors. The difference first lies in professional function. Professional counselors operate within a defined professional scope, whereas company political officers provide psychological support as part of their responsibilities in management, education, Party work, and political work. Therefore, the skill structure of political officers should prioritize early identification, helping communication, orienting choices appropriate to service members' conditions, monitoring, and connecting with specialized personnel.

The second point is that rank relationships both create conditions and present barriers. Political officers have the advantage of access to and understanding of unit life, but service members may feel hesitant to share sensitive problems with the person who directly manages them. Studies on military culture [20] - [22] are therefore suggestive: listening and empathy skills must be accompanied by the ability to create a sense of safety, respect, and non-judgment within the permissible limits of military relationships.

The third point is that professional limits need to be identified within the skill structure itself. An appropriate model must include the skill of recognizing one's own limits and making referrals. This is not a sign of limited competence, but a condition for ensuring professional safety when service members show signs that exceed the scope of initial psychological support.

Based on the above gap, subsequent research should develop a process-based skill model rather than merely listing communication techniques. One feasible direction is to identify four components: identifying and clarifying difficulties; analyzing and determining the focus of the problem; selecting appropriate support methods; and implementing support, monitoring, and making referrals. Within each component, observable behaviors, conditions of application, and assessment criteria should be specified.

Methodologically, it is necessary to combine expert interviews, observation or analysis of real-life situations, development of scales and situational exercises, and then testing of reliability, construct validity, and relationships with occupational variables. At the same time, experimental research on training programs will help shift recommendations from the descriptive level to evidence of effectiveness.

5. Limitations of the study

Although this study followed a systematic review process in accordance with PRISMA 2020, it still has certain limitations.

First, regarding the scope of source materials, due to the specific nature of the military environment, some documents, research projects, or practical reports related to ideological work and service members' psychology are classified as internal or restricted-circulation materials. Therefore, they could not be fully accessed for inclusion in the analysis.

Second, regarding the diversity of synthesis methods, the heterogeneity of research designs among the works, including theoretical studies, qualitative studies, quantitative studies, and regulatory documents, prevented the study from conducting a pooled quantitative analysis to assess the effect size of skill-training programs.

Third, regarding contextual representativeness, most empirical evidence on detailed skill models was extracted from school counseling or foreign military counseling contexts, particularly the United States and Australia. Therefore, several skill indicators need to be further empirically tested to ensure full compatibility with the cultural conditions and organizational structure of grassroots units in the Vietnam People's Army.

6. Conclusion

The review of studies on psychological counseling activities and psychological counseling skills in recent years shows that a relatively clear foundation has been formed regarding helping relationships, communication skills, problem-solving processes, influencing factors, and training methods. However, most evidence comes from professional counseling, school education, or studies on service members' mental health, while direct research on the skills of company political officers remains limited.

The most important gap is the absence of a skill structure specifically developed and tested for the role of company-level political officers, while also fully reflecting the characteristics of military relationships, responsibilities for ideological management, and professional limits. On that basis, subsequent research needs to clearly distinguish psychological counseling, psychological support, and ideological work; identify a process-based skill structure; develop assessment tools; and verify training programs using empirical data. This approach will help ensure the scientific validity of the concept, its suitability to assigned responsibilities, and its feasibility for implementation in grassroots military units.

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