

Promoting family protective factors in working with low-income families

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Abstract

Using a strengths-based perspective of social work, this article discusses family protective factors in working with low-income families in Mongolia. Based on an overview of international and national studies on family protective factors, the authors used cross-sectional primary data from 256 social workers and welfare officers of Khoroo (an administrative subdivision of Ulaanbaatar) and secondary data from a nationwide survey of 3,000 households. The research found that the most important protective factors were the happiness of the parental relationship, maternal warmth toward the child(ren) and the quality of the child-rearing conditions. On the other hand, for poorer families, the most important factors were being healthy and safe and living in peaceful stable family. The article also explores formal and informal family support systems that are available to poor or lower income families, based on data from their sources of income. Family strengths, resources and protective factors are discussed, along with family risk factors. The article finds that evidence-based family support services are recommended and necessary when working with disadvantaged families in the Mongolian context.

Key words: *family protective factors, poverty, strength-based approach in social work, social work services*

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Introduction

According to the National Statistical Office of Mongolia, in 2018 28.4 percent of the population lived under the poverty line. From that figure, 42 percent are children under 14 years old. Moreover, half of the households with three children or more, are defined as 'poor' (National Statistics Office & World Bank, 2020). According to the National Statistics Office (NSO) and the World Bank (WB), the definition of 'poor' is not being able to afford nutritious food and non-food household goods. A comprehensive survey by the Department of Family, Child and Youth Development, World Vision Mongolia and Social Policy Research Institute which involved more than 3,000 households in urban and rural areas, indicated that poor families, especially children, are at high risk of malnutrition and vitamin deficiency, learning difficulties, school withdrawal, intestinal and infectious allergies and a variety of health problems such as lung and cardiovascular disease (Odgerel, Burenjargal, Tumendelger, & Boldmaa, 2018). Although the participants of this survey indicated that poverty did not negatively impact their family relationships, a lack of sufficient income of the parents and caregivers, along with marital conflicts, mistrust, alcohol and tobacco abuse and lack of proper family care were factors that adversely affected familial relationships (Odgerel, Burenjargal, Tumendelger, & Boldmaa, 2018, p. 28).

Poor family members are recorded as having higher rates of alcohol abuse, crime involvement, underperformance at school, adolescent pregnancy and domestic violence compared to members of other socio-economic groups (Orthner, Jones-Sanpei, & Williamson, 2004). These challenges stem from financial constraints and may affect one's everyday routine, their ability to satisfy basic needs and achieve their goals. Despite this, there are many families who avoid involvement with the criminal justice system, support their children's educational achievements, and encourage their involvement in activities that maintain their mental development appropriate for their age (Orthner, Jones-Sanpei, & Williamson, 2004; Batkhishig, Tunemnast, Dulamsuren, Ayush, & Tsolmon, 2016). In addition to examining family risk factors, it is also important to study family protective factors as a foundation to strengthen families and cope with problems (Orthner, Jones-Sanpei, & Williamson, 2004; Batkhishig, Tunemnast, Dulamsuren, Ayush, & Tsolmon, 2016). In this regard, when dealing with poor families, social work services are of particular importance and pertinent to building a family's strengths, becoming aware of the nature of a problem and searching for new strategies to support better problem-solving skills. There is a growing urgency for social

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workers to consider protective factors to improve family functioning and increase their own professional knowledge and skills for practical application. Through an examination of social workers' perceptions of family protective factors, the values of low-income families and the income sources of families, the current study provides an overview of how a strengths-based approach can be used in social work services.

Literature review

Protective factors

Family protective factors are positive factors that help to reduce risk and negative outcomes and overcome challenges and adversity in financial hardship. Garmezy (1985) defines protective factors as attributes of individuals and environments that serve as buffers between person and stressful situations. According to Little et al. (2004, p.108), protective factors are “something that, in certain contexts, reduces individual risks of psychosocial problems, and can therefore be understood only in the context of patterns of risks”. In recent years, protective factors have been denoted as those variables that compensate for deficiencies, promote or create valuable assets and resources and protect developmental and ecological assets that stand against risk factors or increase likelihood of desired outcomes. In this sense, promotion of protective factors and delivery of the related social services means avoiding a traditional deficit-oriented model in favor for a strengths-based approach to harness collective strengths, resources and opportunities of the family.

Family protective factors

Family protective factors comprise external and internal environmental factors of a child and family. The ecological theory of human development by Bronfenbrenner explains four levels of systems with which an individual interacts directly or indirectly. The four levels are ontogenic, microsystem, exosystem and macrosystem. The inner most system involves the closest friends and family members and outer most the system extends to larger social structures such as organizations. Family protective factors belong to the microsystem. According to Garbarino (1977), the micro-system or micro-level is the immediate environment of an individual. In this level, the protective factors include children and parents as well as family-related factors such as the parent-child relationship, the parents' knowledge about their child development, a happy child-parent relationship and the conditions that not accept physical

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force against children and do not see children as the property of caregivers for the child's upbringing (Garbarino, 1977, p. 725). In this regard, maintaining a positive, open child-parent or child-care giver relationship equips the child with skills to cope successfully with adversaries and reduce negative outcomes of the external world. Scholars emphasize maternal warmth as having a strong positive effect on children growing up under conditions of socio-economic hardship which helps them cope with the negative outcomes of the external environment (Kim-Cohen et al., 2004; Bowers, et al., 2011).

Belsky and Wondra (1989) also identified that a caring, affectionate relationship between spouses may instill a positive impact on their children's well-being and contribute to parental competence. Similarly, Scannapieco and Connell-Carrick (2005, p.120) specified "mothers who were happy with their partner relationship were more likely to provide responsive, stimulating care to their preschool children". Additionally, as Vanderbilt-Adriance and Show (2008) indicated in their longitudinal study of 226 urban boys and their mothers, that a high level of quality, intimate relationships were associated with positive socialization during infancy and into adolescence. At the same time, the researchers pointed out that although a parental conflict-free relationship may help the child to feel confident and safe at home, this feeling is not always sufficient to cope with multiple risks outside the home (Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008).

Commencing in 1955, Werner (1993) conducted a longitudinal study in Kawai, Hawaii on developmental patterns of 689 children from ages 1, 2, 10 and 32. The findings revealed that parents with good knowledge of their child's age and development attributes are more likely to maintain a positive relationship with their offspring than parents with lesser knowledge of their child's age and development and, they demonstrated a higher level of emotional support for their children regardless of living in poverty. Gunvor Andersson's study of 26 children who experienced insecure parental relations or ceased to keep family bonds with their parents and grew up in a children's home, indicated that establishing a good relationship with a sister, brother, grandparents, a social worker or teacher had a positive impact on their upbringing and life (Andersson, 2005). In other words, for children with less family maternal warmth and a less than open relationship with either parent, other family members or social workers can have a positive effect on a child's life and help prevent potential negative outcomes. However, since family protective factors might not be enough to challenge multiple risks outside the family, scholars recommend the application of exosystem and macrosystem

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protective factors or formal and informal support systems as well.

Family protective factors at the exo or local level include formal and informal support systems whereas protective factors at the regional, national or macro level comprise socio-economic, political and cultural factors (e.g. supportive and protective legislations for children and families, organizations that advocate for the protection of children and family and public attitude that promote and encourage protection of children). One of the pivotal conditions to provide appropriate support for the family is open access to formal and informal supports.

Orthner, Jones-Sanpei and Williamson (2004) developed the Family Strength Index, an indicator of 23 potential assets in five dimensions, to measure the strengths and resources of low-income households with children. What they found was that out of five dimensions – economic, problem solving, communication, family cohesion and social support – the weakest indicators were ‘turning to friends’ and ‘talking to others for help’ for poor families. A survey of 2,118 low-income households in North Carolina found that less than half of the participants turned to friends for help in times of significant need and sixty percentage of non-working single parents admitted talking to others for help while seventy eight percentage of full time working single parents turned to others for help (Orthner, Jones-Sanpei, & Williamson, 2004, p. 163). Also, the participants pointed out that seeking help from a stranger during unemployment or a no-income period was the most difficult for them. On the other hand, full-time employed couples and single mothers or fathers were more likely to talk regularly to others in time they needed help (Orthner, Jones-Sanpei, & Williamson, 2004). This suggests that employment status influences one’s willingness to seek support from friends and local community. This reveals a key matter to be addressed: identifying disadvantaged households that are reluctant to receive support or have a restricted access to support and finding ways to reach out to them, help them to identify family strengths and resources and provide effective access to social services.

Practice framework for strengths-based social work

The practice framework for strengths-based social work was introduced by Marie Connolly, an accomplished professional from New Zealand (Connolly, 2007). The framework integrates three philosophical perspectives: the child-centered perspective to respect the rights of the child, the family-led perspective which involves empowering families and engaging family members into decision-making, and finally, relying on formal and informal support in

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delivering services which are responsive to family culture. Connolly defined these three perspectives as the heart of the model for a three-phase social work process. The first phase includes situational assessment and communication, the second phase is finding potential solutions, and thirdly, the identification of a set of actions aimed to strengthen and empower a family while ensuring its security. In introducing her framework, Connolly recommends social workers to shift from the old deficit-oriented approach to a new approach based on resources and strengths.

Connolly's research findings suggest that despite living in disadvantaged households and poverty, children with a happy parent relationship, parents' or care givers' with proper knowledge about the child's development, children with a warm and open relationship with family members or a social worker, and families accessing formal and informal support from the local community, are important protective factors that in overall support child and family well-being. This practice framework for strengths-based social work has been widely propagated by international scholars (Connolly, 2007; Saleebey, 2009). However, in the Mongolian context, with an exception to a few studies on how protective factors are perceived, the current issue has not been researched from a strengths-based perspective, therefore more comprehensive research and empirical evidence is needed.

Methodology

Quantitative and qualitative data from two previous studies was used in this study. The first study was the researcher's own doctoral thesis, *Mongolian Social Workers' Perceptions of Protective Factors against Child Maltreatment* (Adilbish, 2016). The data was derived from a survey and one-on-one interviews collected from 256 social workers and welfare professionals in 152 Khoroos of Ulaanbaatar city. The second study was a comprehensive survey by the Department of Family, Child and Youth Development, World Vision Mongolia and Social Policy Research Institute entitled *Current situation of Mongolian families, urgent problems and needs for services* (Odgerel, Burenjargal, Tumendelger, & Boldmaa, 2018). The researcher used the secondary data from this survey which involved more than 3,000 out of 42,970 households in 9 districts in Ulaanbaatar and 21 provinces in rural areas.

The researcher analyzed the primary data of her doctoral dissertation and the secondary data collected by other researchers. The data related to family protective factors and family values and the researcher examined the distribution of each variable, probability of correlations

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and participants' explanations. However, the current study used two separate data from two different studies which limited further statistical examinations.

Discussion and findings

The findings of the study revealed that up to 94% out of 256 social workers and welfare practitioners expressed general consensus on the protective factors and family support attributes they perceive as important (Table 1). The participants mostly agreed on family protective factors of “happy relationship of parents” (96.6%, N = 241), followed by “maternal warmth” (92.6%, N = 243) and “a positive child rearing conditions” (90.3%, N = 237). Interestingly, “parents or care givers with structured, consistent daily routine” factor only received 60.7% (N = 239) of consent from the social workers.

Table 1. Khoroo social workers' agreement to protective factors

No	Variables	N	Don't agree	Can't decide	Agree
1	Parents or care givers with adequate knowledge of child development	243	13 (5.3)	33 (13.6%)	197 (81.1%)
2	Parents or caregivers with adequate developmental expectation of the child	243	20 (8.2%)	43 (17.7%)	180 (74.1%)
3	Maternal warmth	243	8 (3.3%)	10 (4.1%)	225 (92.6%)
4	Happy relationship of parents	241	6 (2.5%)	7 (2.9%)	228 (94.6%)
5	Parents or care givers with structured, consistent daily routine	239	36 (15.1%)	58 (24.3%)	145 (60.7%)
6	Quality of child rearing condition	237	10 (4.2%)	13 (5.5%)	214 (90.3%)
7	Supportive significant other in the home	237	33 (13.9%)	37 (15.6%)	167 (70.5%)
8	Adequate formal support e.g., social service and assistance and social policy	238	36 (15.1%)	34 (14.3%)	168 (70.6%)
9	Adequate informal social support e.g., relatives, friends, neighbors	242	29 (11.9%)	42 (17.4%)	171 (70.6%)

A significant number of respondents – up to 81% – expressed agreement with the family protective factors: “parents or care givers with adequate knowledge of child development” (81.1%, N=241), “parents or caregivers with adequate developmental expectation of the child”

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(74.1%, N=241), “supportive significant other in the home” (70.5%, N=241), “adequate formal support of social service and assistance and social policy” (70.6%, N=241) and “adequate informal social support from relatives, friends, neighbors” (70.6%, N=241). Therefore, the overall findings demonstrate that the social workers agreed on the importance of “positive relationship in the family”, “maternal warmth” in particular, “good quality of child rearing”, “parents’ adequate developmental expectation of the child” and “supportive significant other in the home” along with “proper formal and informal support” as family protective factors. Interestingly, all participants were consistently in agreement that the factor “parents or care givers with structured, consistent daily routine” has an important contribution as a family protective factor.

Additionally, an analysis of family related values was conducted to explore what values are more likely to be inherent in Mongolian families and whether these values may possess a strength or resource for low-income and middle income families. The study entitled “*Current situation of Mongolian families, urgent problems and needs for services*” examined the prevalence of distributions of different issues encountered for three groups of families: low-income, middle income and higher income families. Answers revealed that health was rated the highest 81% for the low-income and poor families and followed by 85% for medium-income and higher income families. The results were statistically significant for the members of middle income families; they value health higher than families from other income cohorts ($\chi^2=4.244$, $df=1$, $N=1392$, $p<0.039$) whereas more than a half of the members of poor and middle income families (76% -78%) indicated children as an important family value. The findings also indicated statistical significance for “family peace and stability” - significant for 33% members of poor families and 40% of normal families ($\chi^2=4.456$, $df=1$, $N=1392$, $p<0.035$). Low-income, poor families and middle-income families agreed that education (25% -28%), human rights (10% -9%) and friends (5% -4%) are also family related values, however the difference was not statistically significant. Interestingly, “friends’ support” – one source of informal support – was not regarded of high importance by the participants. A cross examination of the groups revealed that family related factors such as “health” and “family peace and stability” are likely to be the most valued for the members of poor and normal families whereas “friends’ support” was the least valued factor. In other words, the participants do not consider “friends’ support” as an essential part of informal support.

An examination of low-income family income sources and potential formal and

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informal support factors was also conducted, in order to detect additional sources of family income. The result indicated that 71% of low-income families counted childrens’ allowances as the main income source whereas 64% (n=641) of the middle income families counted salary as the main income source. However, families with children under 18 years old are entitled to have an allowance for each of child. 344 poor families had income from all sources into family income, such as food coupons 25% (n=87), welfare benefits 22% (n=74), pension 10% (n=36) and social welfare benefits 1% (n=3). The aforementioned sources are formal social assistance benefits provided to lower income families in accordance with social welfare laws and regulations. Interestingly, one of sources of informal support was “relatives’ support” and was considered as family income by 6% (n=19) of low-income families. This is consistent with findings by Orthner, Jones-Sanpei and Williamson (2004) which demonstrated that members of low-income families are less likely to receive help from others, such as friends and acquaintances. Therefore, the members of poor families receive more assistance from formal social support system including social welfare services, benefits, and food coupons than the members of middle income families. Table 2 demonstrates the number and percentage of which income is regarded as family income source by poor and normal families, and how these numbers differ between the two groups.

Table 2. Difference between poor and normal families’ income sources

Income source	Poor family	Normal family
Children’s allowance	245 (71%)***	404 (39%)***
Salary	125 (36%)***	641 (64%)***
Food coupons	87 (25%)*	60 (6%)*
Welfare benefits	74 (22%)***	115 (11%)***
Income from self-employment	39 (11%)**	200(19%)**
Pension	36 (10%)	139 (13%)
Household business, ancillary revenue	23(7%)*	91 (9%)*
Relatives’ support	19 (6%)	39(4%)
Social welfare benefits	3 (1%)	23 (2%)

*p<0.05, ** p<.001, *** p<.001.

Interviews with poor family members and a review of published sources indicate that international and national organizations conduct family support training aimed to strengthen Adilbish & Adilbish: Promoting family protective factors in working with low- income families.

positive family relationships and acquire parenting skills necessary for raising children. In addition, these organizations put efforts into finding ways to increase material support for low-income families, provide sufficient food supply and key food nutrients (i.e. vitamins) for young children, increase capacities to enroll in preschool and college education programs, supply needy families with warm clothes and materials for thermal insulation of houses or give a yurt/ger which is a Mongolian traditional circular tent of collapsible wooden inner structure with wool felt draped over it. For example, the Taiwan Fund for Children and Families is an international non-profit organization that offers social welfare benefits and social programs for families which meet certain criteria, such as vulnerable families or a family with 3 and more children (Taiwan Fund for Children and Families Representative Office in Ulaanbaatar, 2018). An attempt was made to explore connections between practices of Taiwan Fund for Children and Families' and the main perspectives of Marie Connolly's practice framework for strengths-based social work, alongside international trends in poverty-reducing programs. The programs for children aged 0 to 6 years old aimed to provide sufficient food supply and nutrients (i.e. vitamins), give free access to kindergartens, seek financial benefits for each child in low-income families, supply warm clothes, obtain scholarships for preschool, high school and college education programs and share school supplies in order to have a significant impact on children's right to life and education. These strategies are consistent with the first principle of the framework: the child-centered perspective to respect the rights of the child.

Implementing a program targeted at providing children from disadvantaged families with nutritious foods and supporting adequate dietary intake is an effective basis for reducing further degradation of living conditions and the mental health of children. It breaks a vicious cycle of intergenerational poverty and helps them grow to be healthy and educated citizens. This is aligned with the new approach of international development organizations.

As to the second perspective of the Connolly's framework of empowering family members and involving them with decision-making to steer social services, mothers who had been involved in Taiwan Fund for Children and Families projects complained that there is less opportunity to manage the services they receive and decide what benefits to seek. This tells there is a need for the Taiwan Fund Children and Families projects to revisit empowerment and participation aspects for the further improvement.

With regard to the third principle of Connolly's framework, relying on formal and informal support in delivering service responsive to local and family culture, three programs were developed by the Taiwan Fund for Children and Families: "*Winter Messenger*", "*Summer Adilbish & Adilbish: Promoting family protective factors in working with low- income families.*

Camp” and “*Occupations for Parents*”. Considering children’s needs and local cold weather, they provided handicraft workshops, supplied low-income families with warm clothes during winter seasons, and provided child developmental and socializing activities during summertime. These are examples of how it is possible to expand social support services based on Marie Connolly’s framework for strengths-based social work in the Mongolian context.

The key issue this article is concerned with is how to effectively deliver social services aimed at strengthening and empowering poor families. This is a core action of the three-phase process of Connolly’s framework: household assessment and communication, identification of strengths and resources of poor and low-income families, and finding potential solutions to ensure their security. As a social work professional, Marie Connolly suggests a re-orientation, focused on a holistic and strengths-based approach that promotes the strengths, resources and empowerment processes when engaging in social issues, rather than the traditional deficit-oriented approaches. By working in an innovative and supportive manner, social workers can have the opportunity to enhance their awareness of family protective factors that promote family support, prevent potential risks and reduce negative outcomes. Social workers work with some of the most vulnerable people in society and the findings in this article can help them in their professional practices of assessment, planning, delivery, evaluation and closure.

The implementation of this approach will require the effort of not only social workers and professionals, but also improvements at the following components of the family support system, including the development of legal, environmental and policy frameworks; workforce in the social service organizations and their knowledge, skills and experience; strategic management and monitoring of stakeholders; implementation of procedures and regulations for capacity building and support of social work practitioners; planning and implementation, guidelines on the application of information and data and public attitudes and participation in endorsing the strengths-based framework in social work.

Conclusion

The practice of social work requires practitioners in the field to be resourceful when connecting people with systems and institutions that provide social welfare assistance. First and foremost, there is a clear need for an approach which enhances the strengths and resources of every disadvantaged household in order to explore opportunities and use them most effectively. Social workers are expected to develop a different mind-set from that of traditional

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deficit-oriented way of finding solutions. Endorsing the family protective factors and increasing social workers' knowledge about family protective factors at the four levels of the socio-ecological theory (ontogenic, microsystem, exosystem and macrosystem) can ensure beneficial outcomes for families and for social workers in their practice. Family protective and supporting factors are not only related to family members and their environment, but they also directly and indirectly relate to formal and informal support systems, professional organizations, and patterns and attitudes in the public.

Recommendations

The findings of this study support the common-sense notion that well-established family protective factors increase the overall well-being of the family. The following recommendations are offered to highlight existing gaps and challenges associated with further examination of protective factors in the Mongolian context.

1. Involve family members, especially poor and low-income families, in the evaluation of their current situation at all levels of socio-ecological theory. This includes enhancing strengths, supporting protective factors and risk reduction and collaborating with them for plans and agreements
2. Enhance the theoretical knowledge of social workers and development practitioners about family values, strengths and resources. Encourage them to apply the principles of the strengths-based approach in their everyday practice and utilize their knowledge about family protective factors at all phases of social service delivery process (e.g. situation assessment, planning, delivery, and evaluation and closure).
3. In delivering evidence-based family support practice, consider all stakeholders' concerns in the family support system (e.g. legal and policy environment, social service organizations, human resource, management, planning, public and other components of the system) is essential to improve the methodologies of working with low-income and poor families.

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