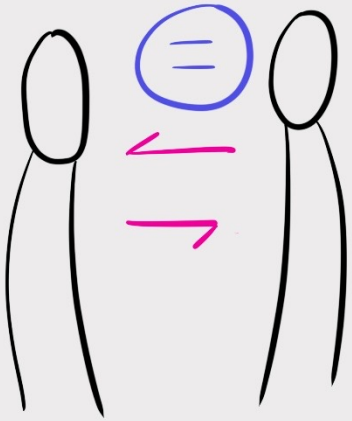
The social worker-client relationship in the digital era

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INTRODUCTION

- The "relationship" between social workers and clients is an important concept in social work as a part of the social worker's identity and purpose and as an intervention in itself
- Something desirable, "good", included in norms and ethical codes for social work, for example, working towards empathic relationships.
- There are theoretical perspectives focusing on the relationship – e.g. *relationship-based practice*, where social workers use the relationship to interact with an individual's internal and external world as a basis for interventions (Ruch, 2005; Trevithick, 2003).
- However, the relationship is not neutral but constitutes a power relationship and can result in feelings of powerlessness and shame.



Howe (1999:48) argued that the social worker-client relationship was challenged by 'lawyers, managers and proceduralists, giving preference for

> …responding to people's external performance rather than understanding their internal psychology, measuring need and behaviour according to checklists rather than understanding motivation using personality theory, asking what people do rather than wonder why they do it, attending to the individual act rather than the individual actor.

Process in which domains of social life are restructured around, digital communication and media infrastructures (Brennen & Kreiss, 2016)



Is the increased digitalisation in social work an example of this? Is it a possibility or a threat for the social worker-client relationship?

- Challenges traditional face-to-face contact.
- Can turn social work into an information-gathering activity (Parton, 2009).
- Ethical dilemmas (Reamer, 2013).
- Can enable new avenues of contact and reach new groups

The aim is to understand how research on social work from 2015 to 2020 describes and analyses digitalisation's significance for the social worker-client relationship



Tools that govern, support, or replace the social worker in:

- Case management (automation)
- Outcome measurement (assessment tools)
- Interventions (counseling with app)
- Communication (video meetings)

(Mackrill and Ebsen, 2018)

THE SOCIAL WORKER-CLIENT RELATIONSHIP DURING COVID-19

- Studies on the transformative social implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for different areas of social work (see e.g., Cheung, 2022; Sullivan-Tibbs et al., 2022, Ross et al., 2021)
- Social workers can maintain a therapeutic relationship with clients (Mishna et al., 2020), BUT the quality of client care can also be reduced (Wiener et al., 2021)
- A survey by Nordesjö and Scaramuzzino (2023) pointed to
  - increased use of digital tools in the relationship with the clients
  - increased skills in using digital tools,
  - a more positive view of digital tools in the social worker–client relationship
- However, experiences on whether stress levels had increased and the relationship with the clients worsened, were divided.



METHODS

- Configurative literature review to understand how a research area is developing and how a concept is conceptualized
- From 5122 to 50 articles – key words related to *digitalisation*, *social work* and *relation*
- Reading, coding, thematising resulted in three themes:

1. BENEFITS AND DISADVANTAGES IN USING DIGITAL TOOLS: GENERAL OR CONTEXT-SPECIFIC RESULTS?

Digital tools focus on and fragmentize the relationship.

Clients can communicate on their own terms and thus experience empowerment and individuality.

(e.g. app with goals, Mackrill & Ørnbøll, 2019; Bolin & Sorbring, 2017; Denby et al., 2016).

At the same time, time and commitment become limited, and instead, the relationship becomes standardized and brief as it focuses on a specific goal rather than on a long-term relationship

(e.g., chat application, see van de Luitgaarden & van der Tier, 2018; Reamer, 2015).



Digital tools make meetings more and less accessible.

In particular, younger individuals find services more accessible, and sensitive issues can be discussed more easily through social media.

Time and space (e.g., distance) become less significant. In rural areas, meetings are facilitated (Chan & Ngai, 2019). Older individuals may also experience increased interaction (Brusoski & Rosen, 2015).

However, a digital divide is created where services become less accessible for certain groups. Therefore, digitalization may require knowledge and assistance for both clients (Lee & Kim, 2019) and professionals (Lolich et al., 2019).

Surveillance as control and resistance

Professionals can gather information about clients via social media, both for informational purposes and for control purposes. They may find it legitimate to gain a better understanding of the client's situation

(e.g., Lim, 2017, see also Kvakic 2022).

At the same time, clients may record, for example, video calls to resist the asymmetric power balance in the relationship

(cf. Byrne et al., 2019; La Rose, 2019; Breyette and Hill, 2015; Cooner et al., 2020).



Digital tools shape social work rather than the other way around.

Digital tools shape social work practices and can make, for example, case management technical (cf. Devlieghere & Roose, 2018).

Technology that malfunctions and does not work disrupts the relationship and can create distance between social workers and clients (Räsänen, 2015).

It is important to adapt digital tools to social work through dialogue among technicians, professionals, clients, and management (Hodge et al., 2017; Mackrill and Ebsen, 2018).

See also Afrouz, & Lucas (2023).

2. ETHICAL RISKS IN THE USE OF DIGITAL TOOLS

Ethics in the context of digitalization's impact on the relationship is highlighted through:

- Client informed consent
- Client privacy and confidentiality
- Boundaries and dual relationships
- Conflicts of interest
- Practitioner competence
- Records and documentation
- Collegial relationships

(Reamer, 2015, p. 120).

Two categories of how ethics are addressed in research:

Protection of privacy and confidentiality:

Digitalization poses threats to the private sphere and confidentiality and must be regulated through ethical professional codes, thereby protecting against unethical behavior

(Mattison, 2018, see also Kvakic 2022 for a discussion).

Power dynamics and client resistance:

Other articles relate the issues to power dynamics and how clients can resist surveillance

(e.g., Byrne et al., 2019).

Boundary setting and client perspectives

Not having boundaries with the client can pose significant ethical risks: inviting clients into one's private sphere, gathering information via social media, or intruding into the client's private sphere can jeopardize the client's situation

(e.g., Breyette and Hill, 2015; Byrne and Kirwan, 2019).

The risks primarily affect social workers and less so the clients. No clients are consulted.



Client groups

Children and youth are the most discussed group regarding ethics – for example, concerning how social media enables information gathering and surveillance (e.g., Breyette & Hill, 2015).

Voices from older adults, victims of violence, and people with disabilities are few, as well as perspectives from poverty, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality.

So…

Clients have no voice (in the studied articles on ethics), and power relations are thus obscured.

In a worst case scanario, this can lead to power imbalances being reproduced instead of empowering individuals.

3. DOMINANCE OF EMPIRICAL STUDIES, LESS CRITICAL ANALYSIS

The typical study is empirical, qualitative, and employs inductive data analysis on a single tool to present practice-related outcomes, highlighting its advantages and disadvantages for the relationship.

Theoretical perspectives are not always utilized and can be categorized into three perspectives.

A. The interpersonal perspective raises the question of how digital tools influence and shape interaction and communication between individuals.

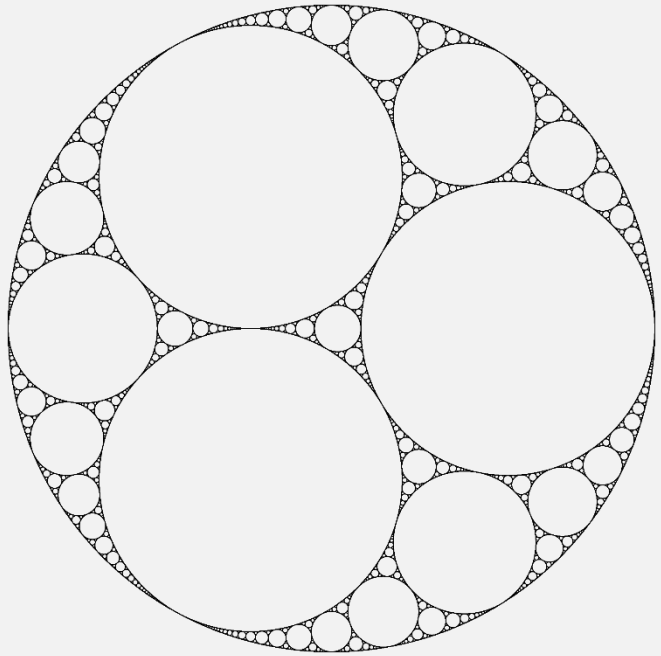
Social presence describes how relationships can be developed and maintained through a shared communication process (Lopez, 2015), where presence can be achieved through digital tools (Simpson, 2019). It is important to be "present" through various tools (cf. Leung et al., 2017).



B. The contextual perspective examines how digitization as an external policy impacts discretion and relational social work.

It explores how professionals develop coping strategies to manage rules and procedures of digitalisation to conduct relational social work (e.g., Devlieghere & Roose, 2018, see also Schmidt, 2023).

It problematizes differences between policy and practice, extending beyond the dyadic relationship to understand it within an administrative, organizational, or political context.





C. The critical perspective examines critical and societal aspects of digitization, such as surveillance and social justice.

It explores how Facebook serves as an informal surveillance technology (Lim, 2017) and how surveillance through technology can alter everyday life in elderly care (Mortenson et al., 2015).

It also delves into how social work focusing on social justice and community participation resonates with the use of social media (Shevellar, 2017; Boddy & Dominelli, 2017).

Example from the contextual perspective:
"Digital coping" in organizations where a new communication system has resulted in increased accessibility to professionals (from Breit et al., 2020:10)

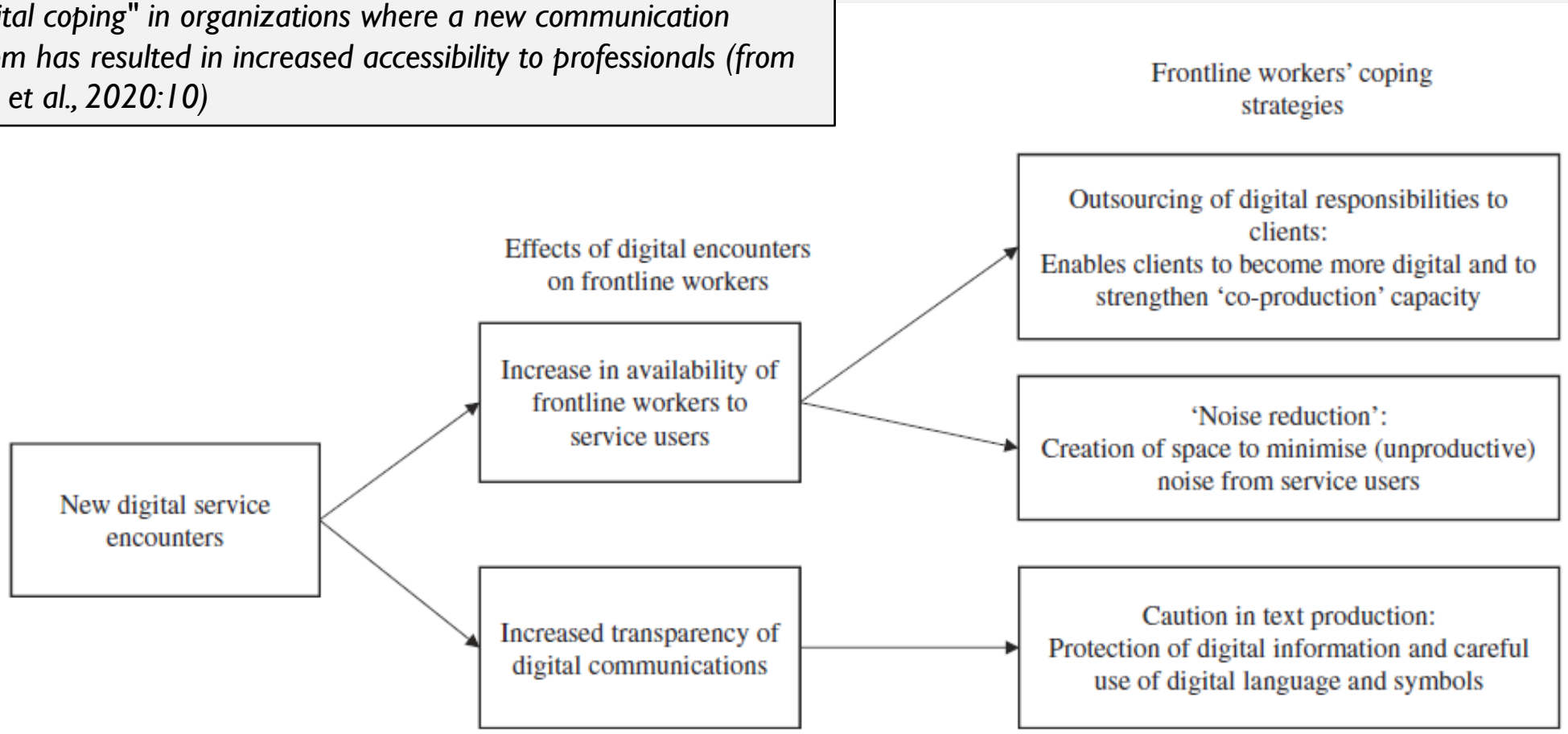


FIGURE 1 Summary of coping strategies and their causes

AUTOMATION IN SOCIAL ASSISTANCE AS AN EXAMPLE

- Automated decision-making (ADM) is used in to assess, citizens' eligibility to public services and benefits through computerized algorithms. Used in Sweden within for example social assistance
- Goals: to achieve legal security, time-efficiency and/or to get more time for client interactions
- Different organizational goals, same technology – ADM is legitimized through time efficiency for *activation* and *relations*
- ADM policy increases time efficiency in both municipalities who use time to either handle more applications or increase "customer time"

(Nordesjö, Ulmestig & Scaramuzzino, 2023)



CONCLUSIONS

On one hand, there is technological optimism.

Digital tools can initiate, maintain, and transform interpersonal relationships in new ways that enhance social work and clients' situations.

Improved accessibility and relationships with hard-to-reach groups.

The risk of social work becoming technical or surveillance-oriented can be managed through education and ethical codes in reflexive practice.

Digital tools, from this perspective, are tools to enhance the relationship between social workers and clients.

On the other hand, digital tools can also be seen as a threat to relational social work. Audit society 2.0? (Power 2024)

Illustrate how power dynamics in relationships are influenced and altered through standardization, surveillance, and professionals' strategies for discretion.

Such insights are possible to perceive through contextual and critical perspectives, which are relatively uncommon, as well as the client's voice.

Studying the significance of digitalisation for the relationship between social workers and clients helps us understand what is considered important in social work and identify nuances and negotiations between taken-for-granted values. Future research could investigate

- whether the challenges posed by digitalisation to the relationship are balanced by other values such as legal certainty and accountability,
- compare the significance of *different* tools for the relationship.
- explore clients' experiences of the significance of digital tools
- how social work can participate in the design of digitalisation for professionals and clients

THANK YOU FOR LISTENING!

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