

Actual and fictitious ethical fears of embracing change: Perceptions of social workers on digitalization within child welfare programs at a selected agency in Harare, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The study explored the perceptions of social workers on digitalization within child welfare programs at a selected agency in Harare, Zimbabwe. The qualitative research approach and a case study design were used in the study. Seven social workers working at the selected agency were the primary participants in the study. Three social work academics were selected as the key informants in the study. The research participants were purposively selected. In-depth interviews were used to collect data from the primary participants and key informants. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data collected. The research adhered to ethics by upholding confidentiality, and informed consent, doing no harm to participants, and respecting human worth and dignity. The findings showed that digitalization provides diverse ethical dilemmas to social workers. Key findings from the research included among others perceived dilemmas around service to clients above self, human relationships and boundaries, self-disclosure, relationships with colleagues, and administration. The paper made various recommendations to improve the work of social workers within the digital space which included a review of ethics at the local level, having a digitalization blueprint for social workers, creating a platform for professionals to share digitalization experiences, and providing digitalization-appropriate to social work education in institutions of higher learning.

Keywords

Child welfare, ethical, fears, digitalization, perceptions.

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Introduction and Background of the Study

Digitalization is the conversion from the somatic and natural domain to the information domain (Dieffenbacher, 2023) and incorporates societal, corporate, scientific, and tactical facets of the phenomena, giving an all-inclusive approach. Gupta (2020) defines digitalization as an evolving process that alters the flow of work to advance labor-intensive structures and has intense outcomes for communities, establishments, governments, and the gist of production. According to UNICEF (2020), child welfare organizations should embrace digital technologies and fit them into their procedures, from engaging clients to managing data. Digitalization encompasses the use of data and analytics to envision and enhance decision-making, mechanizing procedures to intensify efficiency and develop innovations and facilities that influence digitalization (Breight et al., 2020).

To benefit from digitalization, Dieffenbacher (2023), highlights that programs must encompass a digital-first mentality and the nature of the essential competencies to entirely influence the potency of digitalization. This calls for investments in suitable digital technologies, the creation of digital plans, and uplifting organizational ethos of invention and continuous enhancement (Gupta, 2020). Presently numerous digital technologies are being launched in various divisions like child welfare. The cyberspace era has increasingly altered socio-economic progress for countries and industries. Digitalization is omnipresent in societies and hence pervades the social amenities sector (Trittin-Ulbrich et al., 2020). Community services are gradually digitalizing to sustain and administer social work through tools like case recordings, computerization, data systems, virtual counseling, virtual meetings, and policy-making systems (Gillingham, 2021).

Contemporary notions of social work include «e-social work» (Eito Mateo et al., 2018) or «digital social work» (Løberg et al., 2023). These substitutes arise from the adoption of diverse digital instruments and information and communication technology structures. Digital technologies are not inert instruments, they should be recognized as an important feature of social workers and clients that ought to be seized in administrative and social settings (Steiner, 2021). Digital technologies have crawled into social work, usually unconsciously or without serious consideration (Mishna et al., 2014). Thus, a need to explore and document evidence on the utilization of digital technologies within child welfare programs.

Technology can elevate the quality of life, and knowledge and possibly enhance the social work profession, but to a degree relies on effective participation through studies and harnessing digitalization within social work practice (Løberg et al., 2023). Social workers must shape digital technologies and incorporate them into their personal and clients' needs. However, digital technologies present problems and risks. The invention of various digital technologies in social services has formed different intricate ethical and risk-related issues. (Reamer, 2020a). The impact of digitalization generates fresh problems for vulnerable clients of welfare services (Schou & Pors, 2019). Research has

proved that vulnerable people have difficulties in using digital technologies because of a lack of information, accessibility, competencies, and resources to circumnavigate digital technologies, leading to digital segregation and aggravation of prevailing discrimination (Ragnedda et al., 2020). Gupta (2020), argues that some organizations have commenced classifying digitalization as a tool to conciliate management, get approval for new projects, or earn sales.

Digital technologies are ubiquitous in daily life and thus need the mediation of human activities and the standardization of the technologies' interface (Perreira-Garcia, 2020). The connection between digital technologies and people clearly shows the present reality. UNICEF (2020) maintains that the level to which digitalization affects social work organizations, and their staff has been debatable. Jeyashingham (2020) states that in social work practice «individuals, computer packages, and machineries are all tangled in the societal relationships, communication and intellectual issues that happen in modern employment». Hence, social workers are tasked to initially appreciate modern digital technologies as topics for research and the potential of harnessing digital technologies for the benefit of scholarly and qualified efforts. According to Reamer (2020b), electronic activities by social workers promote a range of procedural, epistemic, and ethical complications that create pertinent areas of inquiry between the use of digital tools and social work.

In tackling human development challenges, the utilization of digital technologies has been stepped up, as well as in child welfare across the world. The UK government devised a plan to digitalize and automate the provision of welfare amenities, but improper dependence on these technologies exposed the societal protection net (Toh, 2019). Professor Philip Alston cautioned that the British welfare condition was increasingly vanishing at the backend of web pages and algorithms (Toh, 2019).

Africa is increasingly accepting and partaking in the digital technologies change that is happening in the whole world (World Bank, 2020). A noteworthy upsurge in accessing the internet and other digital technologies promotes development in numerous areas in unthinkable ways. Technology has essentially transformed how organizations function in Africa and internet coverage is hastily expanding, with millions of individuals joining online spaces. Nations in sub-Saharan Africa are approving digitalization, developing policies to improve connectivity, and leveraging digital opportunities to boost growth and inclusion (International Monetary Fund, 2020). Telework has permitted some states to lessen interruptions in some social services provision.

The previous fifteen years have been patent with development in digital technology and has been one of the positive highlights for Africa's growth (Songwe, 2020). Digitalization is one of the greatest influential instruments for executing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Africa's Agenda 2063. The outburst of the COVID-19 pandemic led to an increase in the use of digital technologies which become the more preferred mode of service delivery than at any other period before to enable work, commercial activities, and everyday life across Africa. However, in Africa, organizations espousing digital technolo-

gies continue to be the minority instead of the majority and rarely invest tactically in the development of digital infrastructure, amenities, competencies, and business.

According to IMF Report (2020), there are significant variations in states digitalizing and most rural societies do not have the internet. Songwe (2020) points out the necessity to adjust and correspond legislations on digitalization, including intellectual property and data privacy, in order to realize Africa's digital ability. Countries such as Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Lesotho, Madagascar, Namibia, Togo, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe are digitalizing through positioning and aiming social protection programs to susceptible communities and industries through mobile money, electronic cash transactions, and online engagements (International Monetary Fund, 2020). In Uganda, the «Girls Empowering Girls» urban social protection program for adolescent girls magnificently changed over to online mentoring through digitalization (International Monetary Fund, 2020).

In Zimbabwe, digitalization has been swiftly amplified in all areas of development, as well as the human services division. Digitalization has steered in a novel period for social workers in Zimbabwe. It has extensively enhanced the country's degree of responsibility and provision of services (UNICEF, 2020). The field of social work in Zimbabwe has been altered by the domestication of digital technologies utilized by Social Development Officers, civil society organization (CSO) partners, and voluntary Community Childcare Workers (CCWs) (Makwanya, 2022). Zimbabwe has devised legal and policy instruments to govern information communication technology (ICT), to create favorable conditions for digitalization within child welfare organizations in Zimbabwe. Inventions in mobile money transactions have transformed monetary inclusion while lowering the hazards and expenses related to distributing cash to recipients of services. The Community childcare workers have spread digital technologies to some of the furthest and most difficult-to-access areas in Zimbabwe. Digital systems have boosted social inclusion and liability, through tracking of cases in the referral path using digital technologies (UNICEF, 2020). However, this entails uniform procedures that oversee data management by the social welfare staff. Digitalization within child welfare programs in Zimbabwe was been sped up by the COVID-19 pandemic, which supported digital technologies as the utmost practical method to get to inaccessible places (Makwanya, 2022).

The Problem

Digitalization has become an elemental part of social work practice. The rapid assimilation of digitalization within child welfare programs has notably changed the way social workers relate with their clients and give services. Social media platforms such as Facebook, X (Twitter), Instagram, and YouTube have been adopted in child welfare programs with social workers using virtual spaces such as Zoom, Skype, Google Meet, and Microsoft Teams for meetings, virtual home visits, and online counseling. This has

created new challenges and opportunities. However, there is limited understanding of social workers' perceptions regarding the child welfare-related challenges addressed by digitalization, ethical dilemmas that arise, and opportunities associated with digitalization in this context. Child welfare programs have been sluggish than other sectors in employing digital tools successfully, with research indicating that the question is not an invention but the implementation of contemporary digital technologies. For example, social workers may be less disposed to embrace new digital technologies in comparison to nurses (Løberg et al, 2023). As digital technologies become gradually dominant, it is highly pertinent to explore social workers' perspectives to identify their experiences and thoughts related to the use of digital tools within child welfare programs. A comprehensive exploration will provide valuable insights into their lessons learned, and needs, and guide the development of applicable strategies to improve the incorporation of digital technologies in child welfare programs. Fiorentino (2023), argues that choices on digitalization have been done short of substantiation of their efficacy; evidence on inferences; or wide knowledge on how to amplify gains from their use.

Literature scoping

Social work ethical dilemmas resulting from digitalization within child welfare programs

The spread of social workers' uses of digital technologies to offer services, keep and get data, and communicate with clients, associates, and others has initiated contemporary ethical challenges (Reamer, 2018). This according to Fiorentino (2023), opens a «Pandora's box» containing unanticipated outcomes including ethical dilemmas which conveys the risk of unprofessionalism, narrowed proficient reasoning, and competence. This can be explained by the domestication theory which propounds that the use of digital technologies in social care services is like taming the untamed which leads to the rise of unforeseen challenges.

In the context of social work, an ethical dilemma is a circumstance that comprises a statutory selection between two or more options (trilemma) that are likewise unwanted or unacceptable, each option guided by a dissimilar ethical principle (Banks, 2021). Ethical dilemmas are usually believed to be a normal part of social work practice, despite of the responsibility or field of practice. Ethical dilemmas evolving in social work practice are associated with several interrelated practices and individual matters which include the right to self-determination, informed consent, confidentiality and privacy, professional boundaries, administrative issues, and dual relationships (Reamer, 2021b). They might be also associated with the utilization of digital technologies in the provision of social service (Reamer, 2018) and these are going to be reviewed in this study.

With the advent of digital technologies in human amenities provision, there are contemporary issues about shielding privacy (Reamer, 2020b). A common ethical dilemma encountered by both apprentice and experienced social workers is confidentiality against self-determination, principally in circumstances of cyber suicidal clients (Buffo, 2016). Social workers should recognize a client's privacy and confidentiality, and they should not reveal details regarding a client without being given signed consent prior. However, the obligation to safeguard client files and privacy is permanently imposed, creating an ethical dilemma between sustaining a client's needs and warranting their safety. According to Reamer (2015), social workers must utilize good reasoning about doing online investigations to collect personal details about clients (e.g., Google, Facebook, or Instagram searches) without clients' knowledge or permission; some clients may feel excessive publication and dishonored by social workers' efforts to do online explorations for personal details about them. This ethical dilemma may comprise looking for personal details on cyberspace without a client's knowledge or with no permission and social workers may need to recognize their clients' privacy on one side but may be compelled to trace more details about them (Reamer, 2020b).

According to Reamer (2020b), social media spaces, such as Facebook and LinkedIn, are now inescapable in both clients' and social workers' daily routines. How a social worker manages displaying of personal information on their own social media accounts may produce an ethical dilemma as displays may affect engagement outcomes or violate confidence in a social worker-client relationship (Buffo, 2016). There is probability that the judgment to violate confidentiality will damage the rapport formed with that client. Social workers may divulge personal details about themselves to clients and self-disclosure is sometimes inescapable and has consequences on the professional relationship. According to Reamer (2020a), many clients search for personal information about where their social worker resides and their marital status.

Reamer (2020b) maintains that when giving online services, clients and social workers can have a peep inside of each other's houses. This can reveal the inside of a client's bedroom, which should be private, and this produces some boundary concerns. An ethical dilemma surfaces because on one hand, it might be helpful to conduct online client home visits but at the same time intruding on the client's privacy. Glances of a social worker's house may personify the social worker-client relationship (Boddy & Dominelli, 2017). However, clients may concentrate more on their environment instead of the social worker presenting a noteworthy junction between clinical and boundary concerns (Reamer, 2020a).

Social workers must maintain an exclusively professional relationship with a client and where either the client, the social worker, or both are motivated to expand the relationship into personal areas ethical dilemmas arise (Buffo, 2016). When a social worker and client interface outside of their professional relationship, it is a dual relationship. Reamer (2015) states that in this era of social media utilization, this issue is very confusing for social workers across the globe. Sometimes, after a social worker and client finish working with each other, the client or a family member may reach out to thank the social worker

on social media. Reamer (2020a) states that social workers with Facebook accounts may receive a request for services from a Facebook friend which creates an ethical dilemma on whether to provide services to this friend or not.

Given the importance of upholding social relationships when many interactions between individuals occur online, how a social worker handles professional relationships on social media can cause an ethical dilemma (Reamer, 2020b). According to NASW (2017), providing clients with a social worker's cellphone contacts can restrain a social worker's capacity to uphold formal boundaries and affect confidentiality. Social media is an ubiquitous part of modern culture, particularly for younger clients. Clients may feel personally rejected or slighted by a social worker's decision not to «friend» them. A social worker faces an ethical dilemma whether to accept or reject when a client tries to «Request» on social media such as Facebook or Instagram. According to Reamer (2020a), social workers who choose not to accept a client's «friend» request on a social networking site may inadvertently cause the client to feel a deep sense of rejection. Some clinicians believe that maintaining online relationships with clients on social networking sites can be used as a therapeutic tool; they claim that informal contact with clients on social networking sites can empower clients, humanize relationships, and make practitioners more accessible (Baier, 2018; Reamer, 2014).

Reamer (2015) argues that the around-the-clock access that is enabled by digital technology creates elastic boundaries that are new to social workers who otherwise have been able to maintain clear boundaries when services are provided in person during traditional working hours. The electronic message exchanges between social workers and clients occurring outside of normal business hours, especially if the social worker uses a personal social networking site or e-mail address, may confuse practitioner-client boundaries (Reamer, 2015). This social worker-client workday end and after-hours access through digital communications makes social workers accessible late at night (Reamer, 2020b) thus creating ethical dilemmas when a client sends a crisis-related message late at night. According to Turner (2019), social media has provided an arena that can blur the bounds of personal and work life, with some social workers receiving threats and abuse from people they have been involved with while others have been sanctioned for overstepping professional boundaries.

Methodology

Theoretical Framework: Domestication Theory

This research draws on domestication theory which has been instrumental in the comprehension of how digital technologies are transformed and domesticated through

their association with users in everyday life (Hirsch, 2023). The appropriation of digital technologies in social work practice has been spontaneous, with digital technologies that are not explicitly devised for professional use but are now serving as resolutions to certain social work demands (Castillo de Mesa, 2021). The domestication theory explains the complex cultural dynamics of how people own, utilize, transform, and adopt digital technology. This theory was initially developed by Roger Silverstone in the 1990s to assist in understanding the appropriation and utilization of new media technologies by households (Silverstone et al., 1992).

Norwegian researchers in Trondheim, expanded domestication theory as an innovation literature tool to understand technologies and innovations entering any consuming unit like workplaces that are not households (Sørensen, 1996). They introduced what was termed «domestication in society». This theory is rooted in cultural studies of media use but is informed by science and technology studies, gender studies of household technology, sociology of everyday life, consumption studies, and innovation studies, and has been extensively utilized in enquiring about the mass adoption of computers, the internet, and mobile phones (Ask & Sørensen, 2019).

The metaphor of «domestication» was derived from the taming of wild animals and was used to describe the processes of «domesticating digital technologies» when bringing them into the home or daily life (Aasback et al., 2021). Domestication presumes that digital technologies get in from «the outside» (of daily life), taking something «foreign» with it, which has to be integrated with the accustomed of «the inside». Domestication theory infers how technologies develop into components of daily life and depicts how innovations, particularly new technologies are «tamed» or appropriated by their users. It also emphasizes the creation of value for users and non-users and what technology appears to symbolize to individuals (Silverstone et al., 1992). These transformations happen in an array of domestic and non-domestic contexts which involves people in diverse kinds of relations, as family members, friends, or workers. The mutual construction of humans and technology is emphasized by the domestication theory which provides an appropriate framework for understanding the appropriation and utilization of digital technologies in various everyday life contexts. Wang (2023) argues that in modern societies, digital technologies have been spun deeply into the fabric of humans' quotidian practices.

According to the domestication process, there are four steps namely appropriation, objectification, incorporation, and conversion (Silverstone et al., 1992). Appropriation happens when individuals first come in contact with new technology, and they choose whether to embrace the technology or not. Objectification entails the adaption to technology between the user and their environment. The user at this stage starts to use the technology. Incorporation is when technology is integrated into daily, routines and practices of individuals. Conversion transpires when the adopted technology begins to influence interactions with users and outsiders. Sørensen (1996) established three relevant activities for domestication to occur: cognitive work — which involves learning about the new

technology and the growth of new abilities —, symbolic work — which focuses on logic and the expression of new informative classifications —, and practical work — whereby users customize daily customs and the real-world. This process orientation is one of the strengths of domestication theory and it shows that domestication is not a «once-off», but a continuing process (Müller et al., 2017).

Domestication theory posits that how digital technologies are utilized is very crucial, and thus aims to grasp utilization further than simple adoption (Silverstone et al., 1992) which is very insightful for this research. This theory postulates that to comprehend how digital technologies are utilized and the connotations attached to these technologies, the nexus between life contexts, and how the use and meaning of digital technologies is interconnected or diverse should be understood (Sørensen, 1996). Social assets in these contexts that are accessible to potential users contribute to enhancing utilization, such as computer support, software exchange, and contact with other users (Murdock et al., 1994).

Sørensen (1996) proposed that work is an important life context however, this context and its impact on digital technology use is not well understood. Andersen and Vistisen (2023), state that domestication theory initiated a theoretical framework that highlights how daily life is a complicated phenomenon packed with various rules, customs, practices, or patterns. In this complication, the place of digital technology has to be understood as aimed by this research which explores digitalization within child welfare programs. This theory, therefore, offers insight into how professionals develop perceptions of digitalization over time and the considerations that they make.

Methods

The research employed a social constructivist paradigm. Considering digitalization from a social constructivist presented the research team with different social workers' perceptions concerning the use of digital technologies in child welfare programs based on their lived experiences. This makes a qualitative research approach more applicable. A case study design of a selected social work agency that deals with child welfare cases was utilized. The name of the agency of the organization is being withheld to protect both the research participants and the agency. The research participants were purposively selected for participation in the study. The social workers at the agency were chosen as the primary participants and key informants who were social work academics. Seven social workers participated in the research from the child welfare agency through in-depth interviews while three, social work academics were key informants.

Data was analyzed using the thematic content analysis method. This involved familiarization with the research information, transcription, coding, and development of major and sub-themes (Saunders et al., 2019). A review of the themes and development of a findings paper completed the process. They made diverse ethical considerations. The participants'

informed consent was upheld through the provision of all the relevant information necessary before individuals decide to participate in the research. (Fleming et al., 2018). The research team upheld the confidentiality of the agency from which the participants came and the participants thereof. Pseudonyms were given to participants and did not in any way insinuate the actual characteristics of the participants. Any such inferences are purely coincidental and unintended. The following are the pseudonyms allocated to the research participants that is Tongai, Tichaedza, Bhiro, Busi, Bekezela, Mzala, and Mejury. The key informants were given pseudonyms as Ms. Roberts, Mr. Joba, and Mrs. Pence.

Findings

Social work ethical dilemmas resulting from digitalization within the child welfare system

The study found that there are adverse effects of digitalization that arise from the recipients of care or social worker side although it improves the delivery of child welfare services. Notable are ethical dilemmas that arise due to digitalization within child welfare programs. All social workers pointed out that despite the benefits of utilizing digital technologies within child welfare programs social work ethical standards were threatened along the way. According to the domestication theory, this is at the conversion stage where the digital technology is taken up and starts to impact relations with users and outsiders (Silverstone et al., 1992). Below the paper presents responses from social workers concerning social work ethical dilemmas they were experiencing due to digitalization within child welfare programs such as upholding self-determination, privacy, confidentiality, and client-social worker relations boundaries.

Ethical dilemma involving privacy and confidentiality

Social workers use social media to conduct client and family members background checks and electronic case management systems to help clients which leads to social work ethical dilemmas. Tongai from the In-depth interviews noted that:

Ummm, digitalization within child welfare opens up a can of worms. One can find herself in an unpredictable situation. Maintaining confidentiality and self-determination is sometimes difficult when using digital technologies within child welfare programs. One time I found myself in a dilemma when I was updating case files in the OVC-MIS and one child was flagged by the system as needing urgent attention. The child had a very high HIV viral load results and I had to notify the community workers to find the

child but doing so meant accidentally disclosing the child's HIV status and giving access to information otherwise they are not privy to.

Another social worker Tichaedza concurred:

Ethical dilemmas are inevitable when using digital technologies within the child welfare system. Because we are bringing in something foreign to an existing system and trying to maintain the status quo creates challenges. Protecting clients at the same time maintaining their privacy when using digital technologies leads to dilemmas. I had to search on Facebook for relatives of one child who was lost and found. This meant invading the relative's privacy without consent, but I had to assist the child to locate her relatives.

Ms. Roberts from the key informant interviews concurred that:

Generally, the use of digital platforms often provides opportunities and risks for child protection. This sometimes needs a professional balance between upholding the privacy of the child and their significant others or prioritizing their protection and welfare. Sometimes therefore, there is no guarantee that the shared information with other professionals and the child online is safeguarded from external access.

Social work ethical dilemmas concerning social worker's self-disclosure

According to the research findings digitalization within child welfare programs was creeping into the personal lives of social workers instigating social work ethical dilemmas. This was mainly through the use of social media platforms such as LinkedIn, WhatsApp, and Facebook.

Bhira a participant in the in-depth interviews noted that:

Social media is both good and bad when used within child welfare programs. Clients can search for me on Facebook and see my personal information and lifestyle. One child I was having counseling sessions with once asked me why I was not married yet when I was 40 years old. The child had searched my Facebook account and saw my personal information which included date of birth and marital status.

Another social worker Mzala from the in-depth interviews concurred that:

During a virtual counselling session on Google Meet with one caregiver our cameras were on during the whole session as I wanted to ensure maximum concentration. Later on, the caregiver commented that my lounge suite looked very expensive and my job should have been paying. This gave clients insight into the personal lives of the social workers which removes the otherwise needful professional veil.

Mr. Joba a key informant noted that:

Due to the use of digital platforms by social workers, there is generally unintended over-disclosure on their personal lives. This often diverts the attention of the engage-

ment away from professional issues to being more personal. Such intrusion by clients on the personal lives of the social workers create diverse ethical changes between the professional and those that serve it.

Social work ethical dilemmas related to the importance of human relationships and boundaries

The research found that social workers experienced ethical dilemmas concerning professional boundaries and client relations due to the use of digital technologies within child welfare programs.

Merjury from the in-depth interviews noted that:

Maintaining formal relations with clients in this digital era is tricky and dilemmas arise as we attempt to meet the needs of our clients. The use of social media like Facebook and Instagram may lead to communications which have nothing to do with helping a client and are more casual. This other time a child I was case managing sent a friend request on my Facebook account. Another child viewed my WhatsApp status and even commented that I was looking great. I also receive child welfare services requests on LinkedIn from my connections.

Bekezela from the in-depth interviews reiterated that:

Working with children in these times of social media is difficult for social workers. Children of today are digitally forward and sometimes do not know their boundaries when working with professionals. There was this time when we distributed dignity kits to disadvantaged girls at a rural school. As a way of getting feedback, we gave out our toll-free number. That night I did not sleep with calls from the girls who were calling at odd hours, others calling after midnight. I was in a dilemma whether to switch off the phone or to continue receiving the calls.

Ms. Pence from the key informant interviews noted that:

Social workers within the digital workspace face dilemmas in maintaining the professional boundaries that are central to the helping relationship. This is because clients abuse the digital facilities that are provided to enhance service delivery.

Social work ethical dilemmas of colleagues and agency administration

The research brought to light social work ethical dilemmas of colleagues and administration. This was mentioned by all the social workers who participated in this research. This ethical dilemma arose from the social worker's obligation to comply with the organization's goals and values while at the same time maintaining social work ethical standards.

Bhiro from the in-depth interviews noted that:

Provision of child welfare services in this economy of Zimbabwe is quite challenging. I once faced an ethical dilemma in budgeting for a child welfare emergency project. I

had to choose between procuring more dignity kits and procurement of tablet phones for data collection for an emergency cholera response project. This meant cutting funds from the other to procure the other. This administrative decision was very difficult for me to make and was caused by digitalization within child welfare programs.

Another social worker Mzala said:

Child welfare programming under non-governmental organizations nowadays is all about targets. Due to digitalization as social workers sometimes we are forced to choose between meeting targets and upholding integrity. Once I had to choose between giving services to adolescent girls who were not enrolled in the electronic database as per protocol and meeting our target or waiting for them to be enrolled and then offering services, meaning that I would not reach the set target for that week as displayed on the dashboards.

Another social worker Tichaedza concurred:

I once had to choose between whistleblowing on my colleague who was fabricating data on OVC-MIS creating digital clients who were non-existent. I had to choose between my colleague's career and my relationship with my core worker.

Ms. Roberts from the key informant interviews noted that:

The use of digital platforms has made integrity rare and demands administration more. This means that social workers have had to grapple with prioritizing meeting required targets or upholding integrity both of themselves and the profession.

Ethical dilemmas around service to clients before self

The study findings showed that social workers face ethical challenges in offering services to clients before considering themselves. However, the removal of stringent work hours through digitalization has made it difficult for social workers to make professional choices without going through dilemmas.

Tongai from the in-depth interviews noted that:

Striving to offer welfare services to my clients has created extended professional dilemmas due to interference with my family time. Digitalization has removed office working hours as determinants of engagement.

Bhiro from the in-depth interviews concurred that:

First days I had to respond to all issues raised by my clients on digital platforms without considering time under the guise that I was putting them first before myself. However, when I began having less resting time and fatigue, I realized that there was something wrong about the extent I was going for my clients.

Mrs. Pence from the in-depth interviews concurred that:

Social workers struggle to work in the best interest of the clients and take care of their mental health and family time. This is because digitalization removes the normal working hours for professionals and provides unlimited reach. Therefore, what happens to client engagements with social workers after working hours creates a dilemma.

Discussion

The study findings showed that social workers within digital spaces often face extended challenges with upholding the privacy and confidentiality of their clients. This has often emanated from digital systems flagging clients already in the system for other issues that may need contacting significant others or case care workers. This has created challenges between considering the needs of the clients for other services and their privacy. Clients often end up mistrusting the formal systems because they presume that their privacy is being interfered with. These findings are supported by Reamer (2020b), who stated that digitalization within social services leads to a rise in new matters concerning the right to privacy. One usual ethical dilemma faced by both trainee and expert social workers is upholding confidentiality against self-determination (Buffo, 2016). Protection of client files and privacy should be upheld thus an ethical dilemma arises as the social worker will have to choose between addressing a client's necessity and guaranteeing their protection. This is also explained through the domestication theory which propounds that the use of digital technologies in social care services is like taming the untamed which leads to the rise of unforeseen challenges (Silverston et al., 1992).

The research revealed that there are ethical dilemmas concerning the social worker's self-disclosure. The digital workspace for social workers provides opportunities through which clients can access the lives of the worker beyond professional contact. This often could negatively sway the relationships with the clients beyond professionalism. Furthermore, the influence of the social workers can be tainted which reduces their usefulness in the helping process. A case from the study findings is how the clients after seeing the living conditions of the social worker through the video engagement presumed that they were well paid. The findings are in line with Reamer (2020b), who argues that social media platforms like Facebook and LinkedIn, are now pervading in the personal lives of clients and social workers. According to Buffo (2016), social workers posting on personal social media platforms can lead to an ethical dilemma for these posts can impact a client's result or defy confidence in client-social work relations. Reamer (2018), further states that social workers' self-disclosure because of digitalization is inevitable and this has consequences on the relations between a social worker and client. Several clients search for personal information about the social worker they are working with where they stay, marital status, and more (Reamer, 2020a). During virtual services, clients and social workers can have a glance at the interior of each other's houses which may cause

ethical dilemmas (Boddy et al., 2017). Such presumed dilemmas have complicated the professional working environment for social workers in the digital age.

The study findings showed that social workers within the digital space often find it difficult to maintain professional boundaries and human relationships. This is due to the unavoidable possibility that the clients have unlimited access to the professional social worker. The participants highlighted that often the clients within these child welfare programs would intend to make engagements beyond the scope of the program. This creates a dilemma between maintaining professional boundaries and sustaining client relationships which is an important currency in professional conduct. These findings concurred with Buffo (2016), who establishes that a social worker is obliged to retain only formal relations with clients and all parties concerned should not grow the relations into personal spaces doing so by either party will create ethical dilemmas. According to NASW (2017), providing clients with a social worker's cellphone contacts can restrain a social worker's capacity to uphold formal boundaries and affect confidentiality. Reamer (2015) further stated that in this age of social media use, social worker and client relationships may continue after sessions have ended. The client or relatives can extend their gratitude to the social worker on social media platforms. Reamer (2020b) points out that an ethical dilemma can arise when a social worker receives service requests from friends on informal platforms such as Facebook. This forms an ethical dilemma on whether to deliver the service to the friend or not. Social worker encounters ethical dilemmas in either accepting or rejecting client «Requests» on social spaces such as Facebook or Instagram (Reamer, 2020b). Choosing not to accept a client's «friend» request may unconsciously send a wrong message of rejection to the client. According to Turner (2019), social digital platforms have provided spaces that distort boundaries between private and professional life. This is also supported by domestication theory (Silverstone et al., 1992) which explains how technologies develop into components of daily life giving an understanding of the appropriation and utilization of digital technologies in various daily life contexts.

The study findings showed that social workers face challenges when operating within the digital space between sustaining budgets for social services and procurement of digital gadgets to enhance organizational work. This has been reflected in how the digitalization agenda is now competing in terms of budgets with the actual mandate of the organizations and programs. Furthermore, the digitalization process and target tracking have resulted in the growth of professionals who lack integrity. This is because data will be generated such as fictitious clients' names to meet the agency's required targets for future funding. This has further created discord among the professionals between whistleblowing and maintaining silence. These findings are substantiated by Reamer (2002), who stated that ethical dilemmas encountered by social workers due to digitalization consist of administrators' decisions on the division of scant or inadequate organizational resources, existing allegiances amongst employees, and the utilization of unethical publicity approaches to reach clients. Some ethical dilemmas revolve around

relations among social workers themselves. According to Buffo (2016), managers in social services organizations face challenging decision-making in allocating funds or resources in a period where organizations are giving prominence to digitalization. The choice to afford financial resources for one project and to slash funds from the other is a burdensome and challenging ethical dilemma that is faced by social workers in the field of administration. Gleeson (2018) further contends that whistleblowing a co-worker who has acted in an immoral manner or who is incapable of fulfilling their duties creates a lot of strain for social workers, their agencies, and the programs that they are implementing.

The study further found that digitalization made it difficult for the social workers as it created dilemmas around service to clients above self. This was a unique finding to the study as it was not reflected in the reviewed literature, hence adding to the body of knowledge. The removal of stringent working hours through engagement in the digital platforms created circumstances under which it was very difficult to balance work and life. The clients sometimes would attempt to engage the social workers during the odd hours where the social workers would have to spend time with their families. This also created circumstances where burnout became a consistent aspect for social workers due to extended working times.

Human rights Implications

The paper has implications for the rights both of the service users and the professional social workers who will be delivering the service. Natural human rights questions arise from the research findings. Key issues include the right of social workers to non-self-disclosure of the extended aspects of their lives. This usually infringes the helping professional relationship that compromises the outcome of the engagement process. However, in as much as self-disclosure for professional social workers is regulated, the clients have a right to know fully the characters and lives of those that offer services to them. This within the digitalization discourse creates extended contestations on whose rights should take more precedence than the other or at least finding a medium ground where all are well catered for. This research further showed contestations on the use of resources towards upholding the human rights of the service users such as access to education, sexual and reproductive health and administrative work. This is so difficult because it borders on the rights of the service users and the need within the broader human rights framework to be always accountable. However, in some instances the need for accountability (administrative work) would limit the capacity of these professionals to meet the human rights of their clientele. This adherently shows that digitalization by social workers in their workspaces in Zimbabwe requires specifications and frameworks on how the human rights of all the involved parties are going to be safeguarded.

Recommendations

- Social work stakeholders should create a panoramic blueprint for digitalization that is distinct and supports child welfare programs. This blueprint will provide sound procedures and a roadmap for applying and censoring digital innovations.
- The Council of Social Workers in Zimbabwe (CSWZ) ought to regularly revise its ethical standards for social workers and include the ethical utilization of digital technologies in everyday life based on local contexts.
- CSWZ should ensure that the Zimbabwe Social Workers Code of Ethics eliminates vagueness between what is appropriate and inappropriate, providing clear guidelines to professionals and lucidly specifying how social workers address ethical dilemmas due to digitalization in child welfare programs.
- Social workers under child welfare programs should share best practices, lessons learned, and human-interest stories based on digitalization within child welfare programs. This knowledge-sharing mentality is crucial for the robust development and implementation of digital tools in child welfare programs.
- The institutions providing social work education forge partnerships with child welfare organizations that utilize digital technologies in their programs to offer social work students prospects to advance their rational digital skills. This can be done by availing attachment that gives students exposure to digital technologies regularly applied in child welfare service provision by social workers.

Conclusion

This paper managed to look at digitalization within the social welfare service delivery systems. The paper openly acknowledged how digitalization is a positive advancement in the profession of social work. However, in most African societies such as Zimbabwe, the phenomenon is relatively new. Therefore, the absence of clearly stipulated digital engagement rules for social workers, has often created perceived dilemmas and challenges. The research managed to discuss a range of perceived dilemmas which included among other things service to clients above self, human relationships and boundaries, self-disclosure, relationships with colleagues, and administration.

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