Key misconceptions when assessing digital technology for municipal youth social work

Centrale misforståelser ved digital teknologivurdering i forbindelse med myndighedsarbejde med unge

Mackrill, Thomas; Ebsen, Frank

Published in:
European Journal of Social Work

DOI:
10.1080/13691457.2017.1326878

Publication date:
2018

Document Version
Post-print: The final version of the article, which has been accepted, amended and reviewed by the publisher, but without the publisher's layout.

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Key misconceptions when assessing digital technology for municipal youth social work

Authors:

Thomas Mackrill, thma@phmetropol.dk
Frank Ebsen freb@phmetropol.dk

Institute for Social Work
Metropolitan University College,
Kronprinsesse Sofies Vej 35,
2000 Frederiksberg,
Denmark.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Thomas Mackrill, Metropolitan University College, Institute for Social Work, Kronprinsesse Sofies Vej 35, 2000 Frederiksberg, Denmark.
thma@phmetropol.dk, Ph. +45 72489341

Funding: The Tryg Foundation

Key misconceptions when assessing digital technology for municipal youth social work
Running Head: Key misconceptions when assessing digital technology for municipal youth work

Abstract

Municipal youth protection work has become infused with digital technology, and yet there is still limited research on how to assess the impact of digital technology on municipal youth social work. This article reviews a range of misconceptions regarding the assessment of digital technology for youth social work in municipal contexts. This review was generated in connection with the development of an app system for communication between young clients and their municipal social workers in Denmark. The misconceptions relate to: variations in technologies and contexts; the impact of digital technologies on the relationship; social justice; differentiating between the user and the digital technology; digitalization and standardization; stakeholder and functional models of municipal social work. The paper concludes that the relationship between municipal social work and digital technology is complex and that thus complex comprehensions of municipal social work practice are needed if the relationship between technologies and practice is to be grasped adequately. The paper argues that given the complexity of the field and the speed of technological and legal changes, external support with regard to assessing how to use, develop, and incorporate digital technology needs to be made available to municipalities and social workers.

Key Words: Youth, Social work, Digital Technology, Assessment, Implementation.
The time where discussions were held about whether digital technology should be incorporated into municipal youth protection practice has past. Technology in social work is however still an issue that divides the waters and there are many misconceptions. This paper maintains that digital technology has a central role to play in municipal youth protection work. The paper explores misconceptions that have come to light in connection with an action research project that aimed to develop an app system for communication between young clients and their municipal social workers in Denmark. The use of digital technology in a variety of youth service settings have previously been researched (Schwartz et al., 2014, Szekely & Nagy, 2011, Waldman & Rafferty, 2006). There are textbooks introducing the ways digital technology can be used in social work practice (Hill & Shaw, 2011; Watling & Rogers, 2012). There are reviews of technology such as Ramsey and Montogomery (2014) and Chan and Holosko (2016) which address the role of technology in therapeutic or clinical social work practice. This paper, however, does not focus on therapeutic or intervention practice. As the paper points out, social work is many things, and we need to be very specific about contexts when reflecting on digital technology and social work. Municipal youth social work is complex and riled with dilemmas and issues relating to technology in this field are similarly complex. This paper explores these issues.

Method

This paper is part of an action research project and it is written in the context of developing a digital technology for statutory youth social work. The tool, called “MySocialworker”, is being tested in three municipalities in Copenhagen, Denmark. “MySocialworker” is a digital system that aims to build a bridge between challenged youth aged fifteen to twenty-three and their statutory case workers. In Denmark statutory case workers primarily assess risk and care and refer clients on to interventions which they follow-up on. Increasingly, Danish statutory case workers carry out psychosocial interventions themselves. “MySocialworker” has two interfaces, a smartphone application for the young clients and a
The system has a range of functions and aims, though a primary aim is to enable the client and the caseworker to monitor how things are going in the client’s life in relation to parameters negotiated by the client and case worker. There are two standard questions: how have you been doing overall during the past week? And when do you need to talk to your social worker? There are four weekly ideographic scales entitled: good habits (referring to positive behaviours), disturbances (factors that infringe on positive behaviours), interventions (activities the client participates in), and agreements (made with the case worker). There are standard responses that differ for each scale and that are colour coded, green, amber and red, denoting increasing risk. For example, the question in the category “disturbances” is: how much has “x” disturbed you during the past week? The response categories are: a lot of the time (red), some of the time (amber), a bit of the time (green), and it hasn’t disturbed me (green). The case worker and the client might for example decide to replace the “x” with “my dad’s drinking”, “my depression”, or “arguing with Mum”. As remembering behaviour and feelings for whole week was considered too challenging for some clients, a daily monitoring option was added. The client and the social worker can follow how things are going via a profile system with coloured squares giving the viewer an image of change over time. The client and social worker can also generate graphs. Monitoring change is the main function of the system, however there are other functions.

“MySocialworker” is funded by the Tryg foundation, a Danish non-profit organization, and hosted by the Institute for Social Work at Metropolitan University College, a Danish state further education institution, that educates social workers.

In action research, the experiences of developing practice are used in a systematic way to change practice and to develop knowledge about practice in a mutual ongoing process with the people involved in practice (Bradbury, 2015). This is the strength of the approach and differentiates it from research that reflects on practice from a distance. The advantage of this scientific approach is that in being so close to practice development, it offers reflections that are highly relevant to the development of
professional practice, an aspiration which is paramount in a field such as social work, where linking research with practice is central (Bradbury, 2015). In accordance with this method, this paper presents examples from the development of the “MySocialworker”. During the development of “MySocialworker”, data have been systematically gathered in the form of field notes on all ongoing processes. Issues regarding the development of “MySocialworker” have been systematically discussed with the social work practitioners and managers involved in the development and use of the system, and with academic colleagues and researchers in a range of fora. Young clients were involved in the development of the system (Mackrill, Ebsen, & Antczak, 2015) and were later interviewed about their experiences of using the system, and these interviews contributed to developing the system. In this study researchers and practitioners were a participatory community of inquiry engaging in the practical problem of implementing a tool to enhance communication between young clients and their statutory case workers (Reason & Bradbury, 2008).

A key concept in this paper is assessment. Assessment refers to issues that need to be considered when developing and implementing technology into municipal youth social work and this concept defines what has been included in this paper. While the study has its roots in the development of a particular system, the reflections offered also focus on general issues with regard to developing and implementing technology in municipal youth social work. A limitation of the method is that it is tied to the development of a particular technology. Data have been analysed by identifying key assessment issues in the field notes, and presenting and discussing them with practitioners and researchers. These discussions have informed and qualified the findings and a series of misconceptions have come to light. Research literature about the relationship between digital technology and social work has been read in the context of the project, and this has played into these discussions and relevant literature is included in the analysis. The findings are presented in a way that aims to make them accessible to researchers and practitioners. In
Denmark, no committees exist that grant ethical approval for social science studies. All data were protected according to the standards of the Danish Data Protection Agency.

While social workers are generally not well trained in the use of digital technology, they are generally trained to conduct professional conversations. Professional talk is a medium that most social workers feel at home in. In this paper, the relationship between digital technology and social work will therefore be compared with the relationship between professional talk and social work, comparing a medium that is relatively new to the field with a medium that social workers know well. Key points from the research will now be presented as a series of misconceptions about the use of digital technologies in municipal youth protection work.

1. Variations in technologies and contexts

This first misconception concerns how digital technologies are sometimes discussed in social work literature. Our review of the literature suggests that digital technologies are primarily directed towards four realms of social work: case management, outcome measurement, interventions and communication. Specific technologies may be directed towards one or more of these realms. The "MySocialworker" tool, for example, is aimed at all four realms. Sometimes however, in the social work literature, diverse forms of digital technology are discussed as if they belong to one tool category called digital technology, for example in Sapey (1997), and are not developed for very different purposes. This is a misconception. Digital technologies differ immensely. Emails and text messaging, like telephones and letters, are means of communication. Personal development smartphone applications, chat fora, and online counselling, are interventions. Treating digital technologies as if they are one phenomenon is probably related to the fact that reflections about digital technology and social work are in their infancy. However, this leads to a simplistic discussion of the value of digital technology in social work, rather than encouraging assessing each technology on its own merits. We must be specific about the technology we are assessing.
Just as we need to be specific about the particular technology we are referring to, we also need to be specific about the context of the social work practice we are referring to. Social work is a broad category. Employing digital technology with aging clients not fluent in digital culture, or in countries with low access to digital technology is obviously different to employing them in contexts with high access to digital technology and with clients and social workers who are immersed in digital media. We employed digital monitoring techniques in statutory contexts where social workers have to make decisions that may be against the wishes of clients, which differs from using such technologies in contexts where such decisions are no longer necessary. Using digital technology as part of an assessment is not the same as using it as part of an intervention. Experienced social workers know that the power issues in the various contexts differ, and are significant when assessing how tools should be used. This corresponds with how professional social workers reflect about professional talk. Experienced social workers know that professional conversions about alcohol problems in the context of a statutory assessment about risk of harm to children differ from counselling conversations about alcohol in a treatment context. The use of talk and digital technology must be assessed in relation to the specific context in which they are being used. Professional practice is characterized by the use of different methods for different purposes in different contexts and the continuous assessment of the appropriateness of methods (Schön, 1983). Suggestions that digital technologies affect social work regardless of when, where and how the technology is used undermines social work as professional practice.

The relationship between organizational structure and the technology also needs to be assessed. In our work with the “MySocialworker” app system, there have been major differences with regard to the employment of the technology across municipalities. For example, in some municipalities social workers have high caseloads and are mainly viewed as case managers, who conduct assessments and refer clients on to others who carry out mentoring and counselling. In other municipalities, social workers have lower caseloads and are expected to do more mentoring and counselling themselves. Organizational cultures and climates also affect how digital technologies are used in municipal social work contexts. For
example, the extent to which an organization prioritizes strict adherence to rules, or tailoring practices to individual clients, influences how organizations use technologies. Organizational culture and climates in family social work contexts have similarly been found to be significant with regard to outcomes when implementing evidence based practices (Hemmelgarn, Glisson & James, 2006).

2. Digital technology and the relationship

Another misconception relates to the fact that digital technologies are sometimes construed as necessarily disturbing the relationship to the professional, where the relationship is viewed as the key to good social work. Lonne and colleagues (2009, p.139) noted that, “without establishing empathic, caring, and compassionate relationships, effective treatment and therapy is impossible, and personal change and development unlikely. (…) Case management systems have tended to adopt short-term and narrowly targeted practice in order to keep interventions within policy and eligibility guidelines and under budget. This is short-sighted and completely at variance with those needing services due to issues of abuse and neglect, who typically have longstanding, multiple, and complex social and personal problems that cannot be “fixed overnight”. “… Research suggests that using case management systems take up time that might otherwise be spent with clients (Gillingham, 2009, Samuel, 2005), and Wastell and White (2014a, p.214) note further that ‘when a social service uses a case management system, time actually spent with clients will often focus on gathering data to serve the case management system. These arguments are strong and suggest that digital technology in the form of case management systems change the face of municipal social work.

While there can be no doubt that digital technology can radically change the relationship to a municipal social worker, digital technology can also be used to improve the relationship between clients and social workers. Many young clients find face to face conversations, where they sit opposite their social worker difficult (Sapey, 1997, p.812). In our experience, looking at a smartphone application together can bring young clients closer to their social worker. This is a way of being together that they know well.
Reporting on how they are doing by means of a smartphone application makes sense to many young clients. They are used to monitoring activities using digital technology. They like the immediacy of being able to report things in real time and not having to wait for the next meeting with their social worker to tell them how things are going. They experience the fact that the social worker is continually updated, as genuine interest on the part of the social worker in their lives. Digital technology can thus be used as part of a ‘relationship based’ or ‘child-centered’ (Munro, 2011) approach to social work. There are, of course, young clients who do not want to monitor their lives in this way and experience this as an intrusion in their private lives, or find the use of smartphone applications alien to them, and disengage if they are suggested. Being relationship based or child centered involves taking clients’ preferences and objections seriously. These findings correspond with social workers’ experiences of professional talk. Professional talk in municipal social work needs to be ‘relationship based’ and ‘child centered’, and thereby tailored to the client. Both professional talk and digital technology can help and can be intrusive depending on how, when, where, and with whom they are used. Both media require ethical and professional reflection on the part of the social worker and organization with regard to how they are used.

Using a technology that clients know well can also empower clients in their relationship with their social worker. Some young clients highlighted that the MySocialworker app system enhanced their relationship with their social worker for example noting that they used it to talk together about what had happened in their life and they saw the app as a way of getting through to their social worker without interrupting his or her busy schedule.

3. Digital technology and social justice

In a recent commentary entitled “A digital environment approach: four digital technologies that will disrupt social work practice”, Goldkind and Wolf (2014), noted “although technological innovation continuously alters the landscape of human possibility, it does not guarantee momentum towards the values of social justice. Social work is both uniquely positioned and ethically obligated to ensure that the
drive of technological evolution is a project open to all, and that it does not replicate or amplify existing inequalities.” This issue has also been raised by others using terms such as ‘the digital divide’ or ‘digital exclusion’ (Hudson, 2003, Selwyn, 2002). While this argument appears sympathetic, it runs the risk of social work researchers and practitioners closing their eyes to the possible advantages of technological developments for social work. The notion that new technology necessarily amplifies inequality is a misconception. Any practice under development is per se not yet available to all. Technologies for social work can perhaps be developed and made available to those who can benefit from them. Technologies might in some cases even increase certain service users’ access to services. One young user of the app system noted, that reporting on the app ‘improves your chances of saying the right thing, if you for example you find saying anything at all difficult’. Today’s society in Denmark is infused with digital technology. While young social service clients in Denmark may have few clothes, no bicycle and perhaps nowhere to live, they will almost always have a smartphone, as they are socially ostracized within their peer group without one. Smartphones are used to access information, maintain relationships, and as part of an ongoing self-regulation. Smartphones are no longer cutting-edge technology. They are an intrinsic part of most young people in Denmark’s everyday lives and ways of communicating. If social workers distance themselves from digital technological advances, they risk distancing themselves from the worlds and cultures of many of their clients, particularly those whose lives are mediated by digital culture. This issue can also be compared with the relationship between professional talk and social justice. Just as technology changes so does language. Skilled social workers take note of changes in language and culture if they want to be able to engage with all their clients. Otherwise they will only be able to engage with clients of their own age and culture. An understanding of historical changes in the way society is organized and works needs to be incorporated into assessments of the relationship between social justice, social work and digital technology.

In today’s society the digital divide is in fact sometimes reversed, as public sector budgets for family services lapse behind the technology that clients use. This is a further challenge to social justice. If
social workers do not have smartphones, or do not have the technology to receive and store digital images sent to them by their clients, this can make social work difficult. If an abused child or young person sends video material recorded digitally that documents ongoing abuse, and the social worker cannot access it, this is highly problematic. A gulf between the level of municipal and private digital technology can pose a serious challenge to social work and social justice.

Another key aspect of social work and social justice relates to the surveillance element of digital technologies. Technologies in social work usually involve gathering and storing data about clients and their lives. While users of the app system felt the system drew them closer to their case workers, they also noted that there were limits as to how close they wanted to be. From a social justice perspective, the extent to which and ways in which such surveillance intrudes on clients’ right to privacy need to be assessed. Furthermore, digital data systems are prone to attack. Viruses may cause system breakdowns, or open confidential systems up to persons without right of access. In Denmark, we have cases of municipal systems being held for ransom, and private data being distributed publicly. As far as we know this has not yet occurred in the field of youth social work. Privacy issues need to be continuously assessed when implementing and using digital technology.

4. Differentiating between the user and the digital technology

Another misconception relates to the fact that digital technologies do not offer magical fixes that do away with the need for professional social work. Wastell (2011) has argued convincingly that such magical thinking was present in the development of the Integrated Children’s System. Differentiating between the tool and the user of the tool is vital when developing, assessing and implementing digital technology in social work. The impact of a tool usually lies in the hands of the tool user. A hammer is a great tool for hammering nails into wood. A hammer can be misused to hit someone and you can hit your fingers when hammering a nail. Similarly, digital technology can be misused and used badly. Wastell and White (2014, p.215) point to this in their critique of the Integrated Children’s System when they note ‘the emphasis
Running Head: Key misconceptions when assessing digital technology for municipal youth work

Throughout has been on recording and form-filling rather than reading and comprehension. How social workers could best find their way around complex bundles of electronic documentation has not been the central concern, if it has been considered at all.’ Digital technologies for social work are only ever as good as the social workers who use them. While, there is no doubt that municipal youth social workers’ powers of discretion have been curtailed to a certain extent in recent years, their power of discretion and their actions still affect outcomes. Thus, we need to be clear about when we are assessing the technology and when we are assessing the way the technology is being used, and both need to be assessed.

The MySocialworker app system offers a case worker a way of monitoring how things are going in a young client’s life, if the client wants to do this. Some case workers are skilled in setting goals with their clients that their clients want to pursue. For example, one sixteen-year-old client monitored whether she was taking responsibility for solving her friends’ problems. She had previously discussed with her case worker how solving her friends’ problems stressed her. Monitoring the issue reminded her regularly about the importance of the issue and helped her change her behaviour. Another sixteen-year-old client monitored whether she spoke regularly with her mother. When she did not talk to her mother regularly, her mother got concerned and pestered her, which made her not feel welcome at home, so she stayed out and smoked dope. Remembering to talk to her mother regularly improved her situation considerably and helped keep her off the streets. The app system was also used by case workers to monitor whether their young clients attended school and did their homework. This type of goals was less popular with young clients. They usually agreed to monitor such behaviours to satisfy their case workers, but as they were not personally motivated they gave up using the system after a short period of time. These examples highlight that a digital tool for social work is only as effective as the person who uses it. To use the app system, the case worker needs to be skilled in working relationally, and be able to see and support their client’s perspective on their developmental possibilities. If the case worker only maintains their own perspective on the client’s life, for example by only focusing on reducing risk (Mackrill, Ebsen & Antczak, 2015), but cannot engage with the client’s own developmental perspective, the system will not work. This
issue is common to social work. Social worker’s professional talk with young clients also involves engaging with the client’s developmental perspectives and seeing beyond their own professional and personal perspectives while keeping these in mind. Professional talk, like digital technologies, can also be misused or used poorly. The experienced professional uses professional talk and digital technologies appropriately, wary of the dilemmas, problems and power issues related to their use. The media are only as good as the professional’s skill in using them.

Digital technologies disempower social workers and ultimately their clients too if the social worker is forced to use them without knowing how to use it. There is a tendency that professionals are expected to be able to use digital technology without ever being trained to use them. The authors of this paper for example have learned to use email, computers, smartphones, without ever receiving training. Learning to use new complex technologies can however be difficult when simultaneously facing the pressures of a heavy caseload. Training staff is a priority when implementing digital technology. In social work, implementing digital technology should always go hand in hand with training. We have also found this to be the case with the app system. Furthermore, digital technologies from other spheres of life cannot simply be incorporated into municipal social work practice, as municipal social work is highly complex, and full of dilemmas. Digital technologies which may appear simple in other contexts will usually cease to be so, when introduced into a municipal social work setting. Consider something as simple as sending text messages, for example. Many young people use texting as their primary means of communication. This new way of accessing statutory social workers is as legally binding as other forms of communication. Messages need to be stored, and responded to according to legal requirements. Texting is a social form of communication with its own abbreviations and culture, which needs to be mastered if used correctly, and the relationship between this culture and municipal practice needs to be considered. When a technology such as texting is implemented into municipal practice, how and when social workers should respond to text messages and send them needs to be assessed.
New technologies also generate new possibilities for practice failure, as technologies break down. Digital technologies usually need maintenance and continuous updating to work. New technologies generally have teething problems. The time spent dealing with system breakdowns needs to assessed, when considering any new technology. Technology professionals without specific knowledge about social work practice need to be collaborated with and depended on to service the technology. Dependency on digital technology adds to the vulnerability of social work practice. Questions regarding how and the extent to which challenged clients may be used as guinea pigs for testing new technologies need to addressed when implementing new technologies.

The issue of the differentiating between the technology and the user of the technology is particularly conspicuous in the relationship between digital technology developers and users, as conflicts arise when problems occur and developers blame users for failures and users blame developers (Fahnøe, 2015). When assessing the implementation of digital technology into municipal youth social work it is important to look at the plan for dealing with such conflicts, so they affect young clients as little as possible.

5. Digitalization and standardization

A further misconception suggests that digital technology necessarily promotes standardization. Digital technology is sometimes implemented with the intention of improving standards, changing routines and cutting costs in municipal departments. In Denmark, as in many other countries (Broadhurst et al., 2009), many municipalities have implemented a case management system based on the Integrated Children’s System. The system aims to promote rigor in work with vulnerable children and young persons by ensuring that legal requirements regarding documentation are upheld. The system also offers social workers and managers a way of supervising progress in casework. Digital technology used in this way changes the roles, functions and routines of municipal social workers, rendering the work of social workers and managers
open to scrutiny in a new way. Routines determined by managers, politicians and legal requirements can thus be imposed on social workers, where they previously had a high degree of autonomy. A corresponding reduction in autonomy is also visible in the field of social work talk, as methods of talk are being standardized and manualized and the individual case worker’s discretion is to a certain extent being curtailed (Evans & Harris, 2004). Digitalization and standardization are two trends that are presently affecting social work and case management systems combine these two elements. In case management systems, digital technology is used to promote standardization. However, digitalization is not necessarily the same as standardization. Digital technology is also a driving force in customization. Smartphones, for example, support mass customization, as each user can use the technology to access their own choice of applications. Thus digital technology can serve both standardization and customization.

Social workers are generally at odds with technologies that emphasize standardization. Municipal social workers generally work with the people who do not fit into standard society. People who are not “at risk” and have jobs, reasonable health and a place to live, are generally not part of municipal social workers’ remit. People under social worker’s sphere of influence are vastly different, and their primary characteristic as a group is their inability to fulfil Society’s standard. Expecting people outside Society’s standard to be a homogeneous group, that neatly conform to bureaucratic requirements is unrealistic. As Wastell and White (2014b) note, ‘in systems terms, all families are different and the “variety” of the social care system must therefore possess a rich repertoire of responses’. At the same time social work, like all work, is organized around routines and procedures, which encompass standards. Social work always transpires on a continuum between more or less standardized and individually tailored methods. The MySocialworker app system, even though it is a standard solution, encourages the tailoring of monitoring to the individual case worker/client dyad. Case workers and clients work together to decide what positive behaviours and disturbing elements the client will monitor, with the client making the final decision. When implementing digital technology into social work, we need to assess the technology in
6. Digital technology and stakeholders

A further misconception relates to assessing technology in relation to stakeholders. Municipal social work is a complex practice, offering care under the auspices of legal and financial constraints and multiple, often contradictory, political intentions. Any new technology is by definition an addition to an already complex practice. A key question when implementing a new technology into municipal social work, is how it adds to the complexity, or changes the nature of the complexity. New technologies are often developed aiming to reduce complexity but end up adding to complexity.

A stakeholder model can be used to assess the impact of digital technologies on municipal social work. As mentioned, case management systems have been criticized for serving bureaucratic interests rather than the interests of clients and one response to this has been a call for a child centered approach (Munro, 2011), or to call for technologies that serve social workers rather than bureaucracies (Wastell & White, 2014b). However, precisely such calls were also used as justifications for implementing case management systems (Fahnøe, 2015, Shaw et al., 2009.) Thus, calling for practices that serve the interests of families and social workers a second time is a misconception that does not pay heed to the complexity of municipal social work practice. Ultimately, case management systems were not merely introduced for the sake of bureaucracy or management, but also to ensure rigor in assessing children’s situations, and to ensure that legal procedures were followed to secure children’s rights and to ensure that resources were used in accountable ways for the ultimate benefit of clients. Assessing a digital technology with regard to how and to what extent it serves the interests of stakeholders such as clients, (children, youth, and parents), social workers, managers, politicians, lawyers and so on, is a fair way to assess social work, as long as we remember that social work always transpires in the nexus of the many stakeholders’ interests. It is important that we do not just assess whether a specific technology serves the interests of
specific stakeholders, but instead assess how specific technologies can and cannot serve the interests of all stakeholders. The MySocialworker app system is designed to serve cooperation between young clients and case workers. Using the system is a joint venture between young clients and their case workers. The system also offers the young client a tool for change and reflection and it offers the case worker an overview of clients on the system and how they are doing, so they can prioritize work and manage their caseload. In this way, the system aims to bridge the interests of key social work stakeholders, clients and case workers.

7. Digital technology and functions

A further misconception relates to assessing technology in relation to social work’s functions. Statutory social work, for example, involves three key overlapping functional domains, assessment, intervention and communication. Statutory social workers in family departments continuously make various kinds of assessments. Primary assessments made relate to legality, costs, risk, and progress. Legality refers to the extent to which the law is being upheld. Costs refer to financial costs for the department as part of the regulation of a department’s use of resources. Risk refers to the assessment of the consequences of various forms of action taken or not taken in relation to the child, young person or family. Progress assessment refers both to assessing what needs to be done with regard to case management, and also assessing outcomes. Case management systems generally attempt to support these assessments in some way, sometimes focusing more on certain types of assessments than others. Outcome measurement systems can also be used to track client progress. These assessments are central to statutory social work practice. Statutory social workers also implement and carry out interventions. Interventions can be driven by digital technology, online counselling for example, or digital technology can be used to support interventions, as for example when using routine outcome monitoring systems. Social workers are also interested in empowering clients to help themselves, and digital technologies can be used to enhance empowerment, such as chat fora for particular client types. Statutory social workers can also use digital technologies, such
as smartphones and email to communicate with clients. Digital technologies tend to be developed to focus on specific social work tasks. Table one shows five types of digital technology in relation to the main tasks they were designed to solve.

Table 1. Examples of digital technologies viewed in the light of their main task.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social work task</th>
<th>Digital Technologies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Risk assessment</td>
<td>Case management system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal assessment</td>
<td>Outcome monitoring system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost assessment</td>
<td>Online counselling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case progress assessment</td>
<td>Chat Forum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Intervention</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting Self-help</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Email, texting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Digital technologies are often solely assessed, in relation to the task they were designed to deal with, but this is problematic and builds on a misconception. Outcome monitoring systems, for example, are assessed with regard to their reliability, validity and whether they can function in everyday practice, that is, their effectiveness. This makes sense, but it is a problem as research has shown that digital technologies implemented to enhance certain aspects of social work often have unintended and inhibiting consequences in the other realms of social work (Shaw et al., 2009, Peckover et al., 2008, Pithouse et al., 2009). As noted earlier, implementing case management systems has changed the amount of time spent with clients and how such time is spent. Thus, a digital technology aiming to improve assessments has changed the nature of social work interventions. New technologies aimed at one social work domain or task can change the form or content of other significant social work domains or tasks. Any new technology will have a positive, negative or no impact on other ongoing social work tasks. When considering implementing digital technologies into municipal social work, the potential positive and negative impacts of the technology on all domains and tasks of social work can be assessed with a functional model. The MySocialworker app system, for example, can function in relation to many social work tasks. Clients can monitor their
wellbeing, good habits, disturbances in their life, and their satisfaction with ongoing interventions paid for by the municipality, and these features can help the social worker assess risk, progress and the use of resources. The app system can also be used to support change and self-help as the app system can remind clients about positive behaviours, and help them reflect more systematically about how their life is going by tracking change. The app system is also a way of communicating the young person’s perspective on their life to the case worker on a weekly basis. In developing the system, a key focus is on the consequences of using the system on other social work tasks and assessing the time, managing the system, takes from other tasks, and how it can change the nature of other tasks.

Discussion

The above analysis highlights the complexity of the relationship between digital technology and municipal youth social work. All the above reflections were central to designing the app system. Individual digital technologies need to be assessed both in relation to the specific contexts and tasks in relation to which they are employed and with regard to their effects on other contexts and tasks. Practical and ethical assessments of digital technological need to be conducted, as well as assessments of the consequences of not implementing a particular technology. The impact of digital technology on municipal social work needs to be assessed in relation to complex understandings of municipal practice, such as the stakeholder and functional models. Without such assessments, we risk practice continuously being undermined by well-intentioned, but politically powerful stakeholders with limited understandings of practice. Assessing technology for social work using models developed in other fields of practice (e.g. Fitch, 2015) has its strengths, but we must also draw attention to the specific challenges of implementing technology in municipal social work practice.

The complexity of the field is heightened by the speed with which the field is changing at two levels. Municipal youth social work is changing partly because new laws affecting the field are continuously being passed as the field is under constant public scrutiny. Furthermore, digital technology is constantly
evolving as companies promoting their latest technological solution compete for a share of a lucrative global market. Municipal social work with young people is thus being impacted on by fast moving external forces that are changing the face of not just municipal social work practice, but society at large. Thus assessments risk being outdated shortly after or even before they have been made.

On the one hand, the above analysis points to the significance of the user of the technology, the municipal social worker or young client, and how the technology is only as good as the person who uses it, highlighting the fact that each social worker and young client must reflect on their use of each technology. The analysis also points to the fact that field is so complex, and changing so fast, that assessing and incorporating digital technology into municipal youth social work cannot just be left up to individual social workers, or even the individual municipality. External support and assessments of how to use, development, incorporate digital technology into practice need to be made available to municipalities, social workers and clients.

References


Running Head: Key misconceptions when assessing digital technology for municipal youth work


