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Considerations for integrating technology into social work practice: A content analysis of nine professional social work associations' Codes of Ethics

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of key ethical considerations for the adoption of technology in social work practice. A content analysis was conducted across nine professional social work associations' Codes of Ethics. Although considered key reference documents to guide safe practice, this research found limited and varied coverage of technology and focused predominantly on social media use. In an increasingly Internet-based and technology-driven world, social workers must resist reactionary responses to rapid technological developments. Consulting multiple sources is vital to assess the advantages and limitations of technology use, and to mitigate risks to service users, their families, fellow practitioners and the profession.

Keywords

Codes of Ethics, Internet, professional competence, social media, social work, technology

Introduction

In the last decade, there has been a significant growth of digital technologies, with an increased reliance on the Internet and mobile devices for communication, entertainment, information and practical tasks. Technology has also crept into social work, often without conscious decision or critical reflection (Mishna et al., 2012, 2014). In response to demand for clear policies, procedures and training for technology use, this article provides an overview of key ethical considerations when integrating technology into social work practice by combining the key messages in recent literature and a content analysis of nine professional social work Codes of Ethics. Previous studies have focused on individual countries, predominantly the United States; however, this study provides an international insight by assessing the level of guidance offered across multiple Codes, extending the framework of ethical considerations. With significant variability and limited direction offered in individual Codes, actively consulting multiple resources

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for guidance on the integration of technology is vital. Decisions to adopt technology should be deliberate, well-informed and conscious acts, and the social work profession must remain critical and reflective to ensure safe and ethical practice.

Background

There are many benefits offered with the use of technology in social work practice. Extending options for service delivery, online platforms, video conferences and telephone calls are just a few tools that enable professionals to engage with harder-to-reach or less mobile populations and provide supports to under-serviced regions (see Brownlee et al., 2010; Bryant et al., 2018; Harris and Birnbaum, 2015; Richardson et al., 2009; Rummell and Joyce, 2010; Simpson et al., 2005). Online services, video conferences or telephone calls can encourage a sense of safety for clients, giving them more control over their environment and how they wish to engage, while a sense of protection or anonymity may influence service users to be more open and relaxed (Callahan and Inckle, 2012; Rummell and Joyce, 2010; Simpson et al., 2005). In a literature review of videoconference tele-mental-health services, consistently high levels of user satisfaction were reported, with equivalent efficiency when compared with face-to-face services (Richardson et al., 2009). In addition, asynchronous communication, such as using emails alongside face-to-face service provision, can enable an environment of self-expression and reflection, helping clients to clarify their thoughts and meanings in preparation for their sessions (Mattison, 2012). Email can also support the development of a therapeutic relationship by contributing to positive perceptions of support (Mattison, 2012). However, despite the emerging opportunities and benefits that information and communication technology (ICT) present, social workers have called for clearer direction and policies to keep practitioners and service users safe, while managing the ethical concerns, risks and challenges that arise with its use (Coner et al., 2020; Kirwan and McGuckin, 2014; Mattison, 2012; Mishna et al., 2014, 2012; Reamer, 2013).

In the field of social work, literature has been published on the ethical considerations raised with the use of ICT, focused predominantly on the provision of online services such as e-counselling (see Groshong and Phillips, 2015; Harris and Birnbaum, 2015; Reamer, 2013; Rummell and Joyce, 2010). A summary of key ethical considerations and practical steps advised in the literature follows.

Confidentiality and privacy

Social workers cannot guarantee confidentiality when communicating with clients online, but practical steps can be taken to improve cyber security, including software and Internet site encryption, password-protected computers and accounts, and installing firewall software (Harris and Birnbaum, 2015; Mattison, 2012; Reamer, 2013, 2017; Rummell and Joyce, 2010). Upon highlighting the risks to confidentiality and privacy, Groshong and Phillips (2015: 146) compare sending emails over open severs to 'sending a postcard in regular mail', highlighting how information can be easily compromised. This article advocates for encryption of emails and educating clients about risks to privacy and confidentiality when harnessing ICT. The ethical responsibility is placed on the social worker to mitigate such risks and to discuss limitations with clients, including protection of their own privacy and confidentiality online (Mattison, 2012; Reamer, 2013). Decisions to communicate electronically or mediated by technology should be discussed with service users and mutually agreed upon.

Informed consent

Informed consent is required before engaging in services and is applicable whether delivered online, face to face, or enhanced by technological adjuncts. This can become an ethical dilemma

for online services, as the identity and capabilities of the service user is not always accurately represented, can be difficult to confirm, and the question of parental consent for minors must be considered (Reamer, 2013, 2017). In addition, clients may access services while under the influence of alcohol or other drugs, making them temporarily unable to provide informed consent (Reamer, 2017). Informed consent should include a discussion of the benefits of and limitations to services provided online or mediated with technology, parameters of confidentiality, potential technology issues, what to do in the event of an emergency, expected response times, and what is appropriate to discuss via email and text messages outside of scheduled appointments (Mishna et al., 2012; Reamer, 2013, 2017; Rummell and Joyce, 2010).

Professional boundaries and dual relationships

Communication technology can also impact professional boundaries. Communication through email, social media sites and text messaging can be perceived by the client as informal and personal rather than professional, blurring practice boundaries and influencing dual relationships (Boddy and Dominelli, 2017; Mattison, 2012; Reamer, 2017). Managing boundaries and expectations should be discussed in the process of informed consent. However, if appropriate boundaries cannot be maintained with clients, is it more responsible to avoid engaging with technology to safeguard the professional helping relationship (Groshong and Phillips, 2015)?

Social media and electronic searching

The rise of social media and the Internet has created an intersection of the private and public life, with information published online available to past, present and future service users, providing personal details that may not ordinarily be disclosed within the helping relationship (Boddy and Dominelli, 2017; Groshong and Phillips, 2015; Mishna et al., 2012; Reamer, 2017). Because online information can be publicly available, social workers should remain critical about how their online presence could impact engagement with clients, and take steps to protect their own privacy. This is reinforced by Byrnes et al. (2019), wherein focus groups with newly qualified social workers and teachers discussed how clients can harness the Internet and social media to seek out personal details about their social workers/teachers. Similarly, social workers conducting online searches and social media surveillance of clients to inform decisions on intervention and service provision have been observed (Coner et al., 2020). This practice raises ethical concerns, questioning a client's right to privacy and querying the accuracy of information sourced (Coner et al., 2020). Finally, the use of social media can distort professional boundaries if connected to personal accounts (Boddy and Dominelli, 2017), and the refusal of social-networking requests can be interpreted as personal rejection by service users (Reamer, 2017). Although there may be demand from clients, management or funders to engage online, these concerns must be managed to mitigate any risks to clients and practitioners.

Professional competency

Continued professional development (CPD) is essential in order to achieve high practice standards (Irish Association of Social Workers [IASW], 2007) and is pertinent to the introduction of all forms of intervention, including the integration of technological adjuncts. Literature recommends practitioners only integrate technology if they have appropriate training and remain familiar with rapidly changing practices and online contexts to ensure competency and safety (Reamer, 2013, 2017; Rummell and Joyce, 2010). Mattison (2012) suggests that, as a condition of licence renewal,

regulators should require practitioners to evidence CPD that has addressed the risks, benefits and safeguards of using digital communications in practice. This suggestion could be expanded to include updated training on technology use to ensure continued skill development.

Licensing regulations and practice jurisdictions

With online service provision, practising within the parameters of social work regulations and licensing is questioned. Clients could reside anywhere, including states and countries that differ from the practitioner's region of registration. With the increased ability to misrepresent oneself online or withhold information, a true location may not be disclosed. Licensing restrictions, laws, regulations and liability coverage vary across professional bodies, regions and countries, and a detailed coverage is beyond the scope of this article; however, it is important to be familiar with those relevant to your locale (see Groshong and Phillips, 2015; Harris and Birnbaum, 2015; Reamer, 2013; Rummell and Joyce, 2010). Focused predominantly on the United States and Canada, there remains a dearth of research investigating the implications at a global level or across regions with political and/or economic unions.

Safety and anonymity

Within the context of online, text or phone-based social services, the professional duty of care must be considered. For example, if personal online connections are made with past clients, what is the professional duty of care when observing changes in online behaviour outside of the formal help-ing relationship (Boddy and Dominelli, 2017)? There is an ethical obligation to report people who present as a danger to themselves or others, such as disclosing child abuse, suicidal ideation or homicidal intent, but this is not easily managed when anonymity is offered or where personal data are not verified for service access (Callahan and Inckle, 2012; Rummell and Joyce, 2010). Reamer (2013) questions how a service or social worker can navigate safety concerns when someone 'dis-appears' online and stops engaging, while Harris and Birnbaum (2015) critique anonymity as a barrier to making appropriate referrals and ensuring the best care is received. Furthermore, when communication is mediated by technology, a reduction in verbal and non-verbal cues can impact the accuracy of assessments and intervention (Harris and Birnbaum, 2015). These risks to client safety require careful consideration when harnessing technology in practice; does the professional duty of care change when services are not delivered face to face?

Digital divide

Despite the growing role of technology in society, not everyone has the same level of skill and knowledge, and technology cannot be utilised equally with all service users (Bryant et al., 2018; Garrett, 2005; Harris and Birnbaum, 2015). Digital skills can be considered life skills, yet socio-economic factors, language, gender, age and education all impact access to technology and skill development (Bryant et al., 2018). A narrative of digital natives has arisen which assumes that all young people are inherently capable with innate digital skills due to their experiences growing up in an era dominated by technical and digital developments (Wilson and Grant, 2017). This narra-tive, however, is not reflective of reality. Having access to digital tools and technology does not guarantee adequate knowledge for safe and effective use, and many young people still require additional support to improve their technical and digital skills (Wilson and Grant, 2017). The deci-sion to adopt any form of technological enhancements in service delivery should be negotiated between the social worker and client, and reasonable options must be provided (Harris and

Birnbaum, 2015). Assuming capabilities, access to necessary tools and adequate knowledge can act to exclude and marginalise people seeking support rather than empower them.

Data management

Maintaining records is a core element of social service provision, including assessments, intervention plans and follow-up reports. When integrating technological adjuncts to practice, consideration must be given to how interactions such as phone calls, text messages or social media engagements will be accurately recorded and who has access, while adhering to data protection laws (Reamer, 2017). Such ethical concerns are also relevant to the use of large information systems which enable greater sharing of data across services, with the potential to impinge on individual rights to privacy (Garrett, 2005).

In the United Kingdom, ethical standards have been introduced with the Data Protection Act 2018 (United Kingdom Government, 2018) which established clear rules for managing personal data. The following six principles are enforceable under the law:

Personal data must be

used for specified, explicit purposes
used fairly, lawfully and transparently
used in a way that is adequate, relevant and limited to only what is necessary
accurate and, where necessary, kept up to date
kept for no longer than is necessary
handled in a way that ensures appropriate security, including protection against unlawful or unauthorised processing, access, loss, destruction or damage.

However, not all countries have similar laws or enforceable standards. Social workers should continue to question the purpose of data collection, storage and use. Informed by experience and relationships with clients, social workers are well placed to make suggestions regarding best practice in data management.

Predictive algorithms

Although addressed in literature as a stand-alone topic, the adoption of algorithms for decision making in social services has raised several ethical concerns. Applied in order to model risk in child protection and determine eligibility for resources including social welfare and housing, algorithmic decision making has been harnessed to standardise practice and reduce the role of discretion (Eubanks, 2018). While computerised decision making is perceived to be objective in applying rules equally to all applicants, the power and biases built into the systems are overlooked (Eubanks, 2018; Keddell, 2019).

The use of predictive algorithms in social work practices threatens a client's right to be treated as an individual. Calculations are informed by group characteristics and general trends, not specific circumstances. These trends lack accuracy, failing to draw upon a representative sample of society, often harnessing incomplete data sets which over-sample the poor (Eubanks, 2018; Keddell, 2019). In addition, the right to actively participate in decision making is undermined, as algorithmic calculations are often complex and not understood by the service user or social worker (Eubanks, 2018; Keddell, 2019). Finally, linking personal data from multiple sources can jeopardise the right to informed consent if service users are not made aware of the use of their data or are unable to remove their data from the system (Keddell, 2019). Despite assumed objectivity, predictive algorithms are not value free and an automation of decisions in child protection and resource eligibility can reinforce

inequalities and threaten service users' rights. As the implementation of predictive algorithms increases, social workers must advocate for client rights to informed consent over the use of personal data, participation in decision making and the ability to be treated fairly as individuals.

Methodology: Content analysis of professional Codes of Ethics

Focus groups and interviews with practising social workers have demonstrated a demand for clear and consistent policies and further training to inform the use of technology in a safe and ethical manner (Coner et al., 2020; Kirwan and McGuckin, 2014; Mishna et al., 2012; Social Care Institute for Excellence, 2019). However, professional social work associations have varied in their response to the growing presence of technology in practice. Previous studies have focused on individual countries and have not drawn comparisons across contexts. This work seeks to address such a gap by providing an international comparison, extending the framework of ethical considerations when adopting technology in social work practice.

Social work ethics have evolved significantly since professionalisation in the late 19th century, with formal codes emerging in the 1960s in western countries, including the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada (Reamer, 2017). While the enforceability differs depending on regulatory standards and membership, a Code of Ethics outlines the values, responsibilities and principles of a profession, and acts as a point of reference to guide ethical decision making in practice (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2010; IASW, 2007). Code compliance is typically required to gain membership to professional social work associations (Reamer, 2017) and is used for holding social workers to account, often consulted during investigations into conduct (AASW, 2010). To assess the level of guidance and consistency offered by professional bodies, a process of content analysis was conducted across nine social work associations' Codes of Ethics during November 2019–January 2020 (see Table 1). This was prior to the peak of a global pandemic in 2020, and early research has evidenced increasing ethical challenges in response to the growing need for technology in remote service delivery (Banks et al., 2020). While it is expected that Codes, practice guidelines and training will be revised in light of Covid-19, the content analysis presented below provides an overview of ethical considerations on the use of technology prior to any reviews.

Content analysis is a widely accepted research method for analysing text-based data through a systematic process of coding to identify themes or patterns (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005; Silverman, 2020). Codes can represent explicit or inferred messages and are clearly defined before connections between codes are assessed. Following deductive principles, an initial coding scheme was informed by the ethical considerations stated in literature, previously outlined in this article (Flick, 2018; Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). Operational definitions for each code were developed from the literature. Bias in the initial coding was mitigated by identifying all text with a direct link to the search terms (see Table 2). Extracts that did not align with the initial codes were analysed to determine whether they constituted a new code or sub-code. The initial codes were then revised and redefined in response to the data analysis. Codes were ranked in order of frequency to determine dominant themes. This process was combined with a quantitative approach to assess manifest content and explore term frequency (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005).

As summarised in Table 1, the content analysis included Codes from the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW), Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW), American National Association of Social Workers (NASW), British Association of Social Workers (BASW), Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW), Irish Association of Social Workers (IASW), National Association for Professional Social Workers of India (NAPSWI) and the Singapore Association of Social Workers (SASW). These associations were chosen to represent a range of contexts within the limitations of text produced in English and with free online access.

Table 1. Summary of documents consulted, and the inclusion of ethical principles for the use of technology in practice.

Association	Acronym	Document consulted and date of publication	Explicit inclusion of ethical principles for the use of technology in practice	Approximate word count excluding title page, content page, acknowledgements, reference list and appendices
Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers	ANZASW	*Code of Ethics/Ko te Tauaki Tikanga* (2019)	Yes	2400
Australian Association of Social Workers	AASW	*Code of Ethics* (2010)	Yes	11,600
British Association of Social Workers	BASW	*Code of Ethics* (2014)	No	3600
Canadian Association of Social Workers	CASW	*Code of Ethics* (2005)	No	3500
Irish Association of Social Workers	IASW	*Code of Ethics* (2007).	No	1100
International Federation of Social Workers	IFSW	*Global social work statement of ethical principles* (2018)	Yes	1400
National Association for Professional Social Workers of India	NAPSWI	*Code of ethics for professional social workers in India* (2015).	Yes	10,700
National Association of Social Workers (United States)	NASW	*Code of Ethics* (2017).	Yes	9200
Singapore Association of Social Workers	SASW	*Code of Professional Ethics (3rd Revision)* (2017).	Yes	3100

Table 2. Frequency of terms searched across all nine documents.

Term searched	ANZASW	AASW	BASW	CASW	IASW	IFSW	NASW	NAPSWI	SASW	Total term frequency
Digital	1	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	2	5
Online	0	2	0	0	0	0	3	0	1	6
Social media	3	0	0	0	0	3	2	0	2	10
Technology	1	0	0	0	0	4	20	0	3	28
ICT	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Internet	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	3	1	6
Email or e-mail	0	3	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	5
Computer	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	4
Social network(ing site)	0	3	0	0	0	0	4	0	2	9

The United Kingdom, Canada and the United States cover large areas that present diversity in culture and population across territories, regions and states. The BASW has branches for England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Similarly, the CASW acts as a confederation with nine provincial and territorial partner organisations, and the NASW has 55 chapters across the United States. It should be acknowledged, however, that the Codes of Ethics included in this study are not a representative sample of professional associations and overwhelmingly represent societies with a western or colonial influence and history. Further comparative studies should be conducted to include a greater range of associations, recognise indigenous social work practice and address diverse cultural contexts.

A ninth document, the 'Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles' by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2018) was included. As the global body for social work professionals, all eight associations are members, and the IFSW also represents professional social work associations from across Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America, Asia, the Pacific and Europe. The IFSW does not have a specific Code of Ethics, but the statement of ethical principles holds a similar role in informing practice decisions.

Findings

An initial text search was conducted to detect any explicit mention of technology in social work. Terms included *digital*, *online*, *social media*, *technology*, *ICT*, *Internet*, *email* and *computer*, and are summarised in Table 2. The term *social network(ing) site* was later included as a synonym for social media, as it was used interchangeably. When combined, *social media* and *social network(ing) site* was the second most frequent term. This was notable in the content analysis wherein social media was a dominant theme. *Technology* was the most frequent term, favoured by the IFSW, SASW and NASW. Interestingly, as a common acronym for information and communication technology, *ICT* was not used in the documents, but the full term was captured under the *technology* word search.

As seen in Table 1, three documents (BASW, CASW, IASW) retrieved no hits. This was confirmed with a full reading of the Codes, which found no evidence of direct or indirect referencing to technology in social work practice. Although the BASW (2014) and CASW (2005) Codes of Ethics have no mention of technology, a separate policy focused on social media use was identified for both associations (BASW, 2018; CASW, 2014).

The NASW (2017) offered the most comprehensive coverage of technology in their Code of Ethics, providing specific steps to reduce associated risks and navigate ethical dilemmas. However, others mentioned technology only briefly. The ANZASW notes that the use of digital technology and social media 'may pose threats to a range of our ethical obligations' (2019: 11), but fails to indicate relevant ethical obligations, what risks might present or how to minimise them. The AASW (2010) aligns the use of technology, including online platforms, telephones and computers, with remote and rural service delivery, a reflection of the geographical make-up of the country. This classification, however, risks undermining the applicability of such considerations to technology use in urban or suburban contexts. Engaging with information management software, emails, telephone calls or Internet-based resources is not restricted to rural or remote practice and is used alongside face-to-face practice or adopted in response to client preferences; therefore, applicability across contexts should not be overlooked (Mattison, 2012; Mishna et al., 2012).

In the NAPSWI (2015) Code of Ethics, technology was only recognised in the context of social work education, stating an obligation to ensure adequate infrastructure and equipment for distance, mixed-mode or Internet-based social work education to facilitate programme objectives. The principle of CPD and responsibility to contribute to the training and education of students and colleagues are present across the nine documents, yet the NAPSWI was the only Code to make a

direct link between the use of technology and the delivery of social work education. With the development of mobile applications for expanding social work knowledge and training (see Campbell and McColgan, 2016; Turner et al., 2020) and the evolution of web-based content revolutionising opportunities for gaining formal social work qualifications by distance (Shorkey and Uebel, 2014), the author expects a growing recognition in ethical standards for online education. While it is noted that some associations have additional practice standards that include social work education, these are not referred to in the Codes of Ethics, even in instances where sections were dedicated to education and training.

In total, seven themes were identified in the content analysis, each of which is presented in turn.

Social media

Social media use was the most common theme evident across the Codes of Ethics. Five of the nine documents recognised risks to social workers, clients, the community and/or the professional body when using social media and social networking sites. Threats to confidentiality, professional boundaries and reputation were highlighted, with recommendations to establish separate online accounts for communicating with service users. The intersection of the private and public life through social media is recognised, with Codes stating social workers should be aware of both professional engagements online and personal social media use and how this may affect their reputation and ability to work effectively with clients (NASW, 2017; SASW, 2017):

> Social workers, not their clients or former clients, are responsible for setting and maintaining clear and appropriate professional boundaries in all forms of communication, including face to face contact, written communication, telephone and online communications (including social networking, email, blogging and instant messaging). (AASW, 2010: 22)

> Social workers shall take reasonable steps to prevent clients' access to their personal social networking sites to avoid boundary confusion and inappropriate dual relationships. Steps may include the setting up of a separate social media site or website to communicate with clients. (SASW, 2017: 5)

> Digital technology and social media may pose threats to the practice of many ethical standards. (IFSW, 2018)

> We commit to representing the profession of social work, our colleagues, our Association and our employers fairly, accurately and respectfully in all public and social media. (ANZASW, 2019: 13)

Electronic searching

Although discussed in conjunction with the use of social media in previous studies (Byrnes et al., 2019; Coner et al., 2020), using the Internet to seek information on clients has gained significantly less attention in the Codes consulted. Social media use addressed the representation of social workers and keeping personal data safe, but failed to question or offer guidance on the use of Internet search engines or social media surveillance to gain information on service users. Addressed only by the NASW, Internet searching standards require social workers to be transparent and only use the Internet to source information in essential situations:

> (p) Social workers should develop and inform clients about their policies, consistent with prevailing social work ethical standards, on the use of electronic technology, including Internet-based search engines, to gather information about clients.

> (q) Social workers should avoid searching or gathering client information electronically unless there are compelling professional reasons, and when appropriate, with the client's informed consent. (NASW, 2017)

The NASW (2017), however, does not address the practice of monitoring client social media accounts. When compared with literature (Byrnes et al., 2019; Coner et al., 2020), this inconsistency raises the following question: How do perceptions of Internet searching for personal information on service users differ from the surveillance of social media in social work practice? Even in instances where social workers were resistant to the use of social media to gain information on their clients, they were faced with dilemmas of being 'drawn in' to consulting Facebook by third parties, including managers (Coner et al., 2020). This is an emerging area of research and practice; however, an exclusion from Codes raises ethical dilemmas. As social media increases in our day-to-day lives, infringement of clients' rights to informed consent and privacy is predicted to grow.

Professional boundaries and dual relationships

The risk of electronic communication being perceived as informal and blurring the professional/personal boundaries is recognised in three Codes. As quoted above, the AASW (2010) places responsibility on the social worker to maintain clear boundaries across all forms of engagement and communication, including telephones, email and Skype. Both the AASW (2010) and NASW (2017) add to existing literature by specifically prohibiting sexualised conduct with clients, client's relatives and their close connections, through any form of electronic expressions including social media, email or text messaging. Professional boundaries were closely linked to the use of social media, with two documents recommending social workers decline personal social media requests due to the risks of boundary confusion, inappropriate dual relationships, and potential harm to clients (NASW, 2017; SASW, 2017). The SASW (2017), however, suggests social media can be used in practice, recommending separate personal and work-related social media accounts in order to maintain boundaries.

Cyber security and confidentiality

The importance of cyber security and the added risks to confidentiality were addressed in four Codes (AASW, IFSW, NASW, SASW). Practical steps to mitigate risks were detailed, including passwords, encryption, anti-virus software and firewalls to safeguard against unauthorised access. The SASW (2017: 5) states it is the social worker's role to 'inform clients on the potential risks and adverse consequences associated with the disclosure of confidential information on the internet, and on social media, text messaging, and video conferencing sites and applications'. These Codes reiterate concerns raised in literature around confidentiality and data management, inquiring as to who has access to personal data and what the level of security is over stored files and online communications (Garrett, 2005; Groshong and Phillips, 2015; Mattison, 2012; Reamer, 2013; Rummell and Joyce, 2010). Unlike the storage of paper files in locked cabinets, the behaviours and choices of service users have a direct impact on the security of information communicated through technology, and steps must be taken to educate them on cyber security. Combined with the growth in cloud-based storage and development of mobile applications to support intervention (e.g. Schlosser et al., 2018), the considerations for data protection are increasingly complex.

Professional competency

Although competency and CPD are noted in each Code, competence with technology was only evidenced in the more recently updated documents. Reflecting the messages in literature (Reamer, 2013, 2017; Rummell and Joyce, 2010), three Codes highlight the importance of developing adequate knowledge and skills before adopting technology in practice, with ongoing training in technological advancements necessary in order to maintain professional and safe services:

We commit to obtaining the necessary knowledge and skills for the proper and respectful use of digital technology and social media. (ANZASW, 2019: 11)

. . . must obtain the necessary knowledge and skills to guard against unethical practice when using technology. (IFSW, 2018)

1.04 (d) Social workers who use technology in the provision of social work services should ensure that they have the necessary knowledge and skills to provide such services in a competent manner. This includes an understanding of the special communication challenges when using technology and the ability to implement strategies to address these challenges. (NASW, 2017)

Digital divide

Although a digital divide is discussed in literature (Bryant et al., 2018; Wilson and Grant, 2017), only one Code recognises the need to consider a client's technological skills. The NASW (2017) endorses critical reflection for social workers to be aware of the intellectual, emotional and physical capabilities of clients to both use technology and understand the associated benefits, risks and limitations. This standard highlights the importance of assessing the client's willingness or ability to engage with technology and to discuss alternative methods for service delivery rather than adopting a standardised approach.

Licensing regulations and practice jurisdictions

The NASW is the only Code that addresses the potential for laws to differ across jurisdictions. The Code states practitioners must be aware of, and comply with, the regulations that govern practice in both the social worker's and client's location. However, other professional bodies, including the AASW, BASW and CASW, operate in a context where legislation can differ depending on states, territories or devolved government structures. Although overlooked in the Codes and in literature outside of the United States and Canada, social workers have a professional and ethical responsibility to practice in accordance with relevant laws and must be aware of different regulations when services mediated by technology absolve the restrictions of physical location.

Discussion

Of the Codes consulted, none addressed the use of predictive algorithms in decision making. As a developing area of research and tools being introduced to social services, greater attention is needed to ensure that the rights of service users are protected. With social workers' engagement with clients and first-hand knowledge of service delivery and systems, they should be active stakeholders and can harness a collective professional identity to influence reviews and evaluations of existing and developing algorithmic tools. As research in the area of predictive algorithms develops, the voices of social workers and service users must be heard.

As seen in Table 1, the Codes range in length from approximately 1140 words (IASW, 2007) to more than 10,000 (AASW, 2010; NAPSWI, 2015); however, document length is not a definitive indicator for comprehensive inclusion of technological considerations. In approximately 1400 words, the IFSW (2018) addressed the use of technology and social media, recognised cyber security and stated the importance of CPD for competent use of technology. Despite being of comparable length, the IASW (2007) fails to incorporate any mention of technology. Furthermore, the CASW (2005) offers no explicit guidance on technology in 3500 words, yet the SASW (2017) offers guidance for risks to confidentiality and managing professional boundaries with the use of social media within a shorter document. These contradictions evidenced an inability to predict the inclusion of technology based on word length.

The processes for updating national and international professional documents can be time-consuming, restricting the ability to respond in a timely manner to dynamic work environments and societal changes. Yet the dates of publication indicate a developing trend. The three Codes with no reference to technological developments were published between 2005 and 2014, whereas the most comprehensive guidance with specific technology sections were offered by more recently updated publications (IFSW, 2018; NASW, 2017). This difference suggests the timing of reviews has relevance to the inclusion of technology, with content reflecting social and contextual factors relevant to the time. Informed by front-line practice, social workers are well placed to make suggestions regarding best practice in technology adoption and data management, and the development of policies and review of Codes should actively seek their insights. Further research, however, is required in order to better understand the variance across Codes and the factors shaping professional associations' responses to technology in social work.

Ethical dilemmas and standards are constantly evolving in response to professional, individual and societal changes, developing practice theories and shifting models of service delivery; therefore, Codes of Ethics must remain living documents. Codes will continue to have limitations and cannot account for every possible outcome in practice as social work is not prescriptive. Responsiveness to diversity is necessary and guidelines must offer this flexibility. While clear policies support competence and ethical decision making, the values, responsibilities and principles underlining a Code of Ethics are transferable across practice contexts; therefore, even when technology use is not explicitly stated, principles such as informed consent, empowerment, safety, confidentiality and professional boundaries remain applicable. It was only the IFSW (2018) that highlighted the relevance of principles regardless of the mode of services delivery, yet this notion should be considered across all of the Codes consulted. Because a Code of Ethics is a key document to guide practice, in order to counteract limitations future reviews should incorporate references to other practice standards and resources such as the AASW (2010), which provides an appendix for relevant national legislation, declarations and treaties.

Conclusion

With significant variation across Codes and, with the exception of the NASW (2017), limited guidance offered in each, this overview concludes that social workers cannot rely on their professional association's Code of Ethics alone. Social workers should actively seek guidance through multiple sources, including published studies, additional association guidelines such as social media policies, national legislation, sister associations, and professional supervision. These resources are vital to support reflexive practice that continues to question day-to-day actions and whether risks have been sufficiently considered, managed or mitigated to ensure safe and ethical practice when adopting technology.

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