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Digitisation as a tool to enhance learning processes and organisational knowledge in Social Services. First results from a qualitative study conducted in the North East of Italy

La digitalización como herramienta para mejorar los procesos de aprendizaje y el conocimiento organizativo en los Servicios Sociales. Primeros resultados de una investigación cualitativa realizada en el noreste de Italia

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Resumen

Introducción. La pandemia de Covid-19 ha dado un fuerte impulso a la digitalización de los servicios sociales, forzando el uso de las TIC para garantizar la continuidad del servicio a pesar de las restricciones de movimiento y contactos impuestas para contener el virus. El artículo presenta los resultados de una investigación cualitativa dirigida a identificar si la digitalización impuesta a los servicios sociales por la pandemia de Covid-19 fue un cambio transitorio, cuyos efectos se desvanecerían al final de la pandemia, o uno a largo plazo que dio lugar a procesos de aprendizaje que innovaron su conocimiento organizativo. *Metodología.* Se llevó a cabo una investigación cualitativa exploratoria, con entrevistas semiestructuradas. Entre finales de mayo y finales de julio de 2023, se entrevistó a todos los gerentes de las 18 áreas de servicios sociales de la región de Friuli-Venezia Giulia. La entrevista trató

Abstract

Introduction. The COVID-19 pandemic prompted the swift digitisation of social services, forcing the use of ICT to ensure continuity of service despite the lockdown. This article presents the results of a qualitative study aimed at identifying whether the imposed digitisation was transitory and destined to fade post-pandemic, or whether, on the contrary, the digitisation was long-term, leading to learning and innovation in the organisational knowledge of social services. *Methodology.* The study was of an exploratory qualitative nature, based on semi-structured interviews. From the end of May to the end of July 2023, all managers of the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region's 18 social service areas were interviewed. Several issues were covered in these interviews, namely: which ICTs were introduced and where; which target groups were involved; how ICTs were received by social

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de investigar varias cuestiones, como qué TIC se introdujeron y dónde, qué grupos destinatarios participaron, cómo recibieron las TIC las/os trabajadoras/es sociales y las personas usuarias y, por último, qué impacto tuvieron en la relación con ellos. *Resultados*. Las entrevistas mostraron que la digitalización impuesta por Covid-19 fue bien acogida por la mayoría de las/os trabajadoras/es sociales y por muchas personas usuarias. Este fenómeno se produjo sin intervenciones específicas de formación, sino a través de iniciativas de autoaprendizaje que surgieron espontáneamente entre las/os trabajadoras/es sociales. Desencadenó una dinámica de cambio que afectaba principalmente a la dimensión organizativa de los servicios y, parcialmente, a las prácticas de las/os trabajadoras/es sociales con las personas usuarias. *Discusión*. Mientras que el cambio en la dimensión organizativa de los servicios parece una verdadera innovación ya que ha desarrollado nuevas formas de concebir y utilizar las nuevas tecnologías, el cambio en la intervención directa del trabajador social o de la trabajadora social con la persona usuaria no parece ser una verdadera innovación ya que no introduce una discontinuidad real con respecto a las formas anteriores de considerar y realizar la relación entre trabajador/a social y persona usuaria. Esto se debe probablemente a la emergencia por Covid y a las formas informales de aprender el uso de las nuevas tecnologías. Se trata de una hipótesis en la que es necesario profundizar a través de nuevas investigaciones. *Conclusiones*. Para que la introducción de las TIC en los servicios sociales represente un proceso de aprendizaje capaz de innovar las organizaciones de trabajo social, así como las prácticas de las/os trabajadoras/es sociales, es necesario acompañarla de procesos de formación continua capaces de desarrollar la reflexividad de las/os trabajadoras/es sociales sobre la forma en que utilizan estas herramientas. Al mismo tiempo, es necesario que las/os trabajadoras/es sociales adopten una actitud activa y proactiva ante las nuevas tecnologías y participen activamente en las vías por las que se introducen en las organizaciones. Por este motivo, también es necesario invertir en cursos de formación estructurados capaces de desarrollar métodos innovadores de enseñanza y aprendizaje basados en el uso de las nuevas tecnologías.

Palabras clave: digitalización; tecnología de la información; procesos de aprendizaje; conocimiento; servicios sociales; trabajo social.

workers and users; and finally, what impact they had on their relationships. *Results*. According to the interviewees, the COVID-19-imposed digitisation was welcomed by most social workers and by many users. No specific training interventions had taken place: digitisation unfolded through self-learning initiatives that arose spontaneously among social workers. It triggered a dynamic of change that mainly concerned the organisational dimension of the services and partially social workers' practices with users. *Discussion*. The organisational change seems to represent a true innovation. Indeed, it has led to new ways of conceiving and using ICTs. However, alterations in direct social worker interventions with users do not appear to represent a true innovation: they have not embodied a real discontinuity regarding the previous approaches to the social worker-user relationship. This is probably due to the COVID emergency and the informal ways of learning how to use these technologies. Such a hypothesis, however, needs to be deepened through further research. *Conclusions*. To represent a form of learning leading towards innovation in social work organisations as well as social worker practices, the introduction of ICT needs to come with training processes capable of developing social worker reflections on how these tools should be used. At the same time, social workers must adopt and active as well as proactive approaches to new technologies and their implementation in organisations. For this reason, it is also necessary to invest in structured training courses capable of developing innovative teaching and learning methods based on the use of new technologies.

Keywords: digitisation; information technology; learning processes; knowledge; social services; social work.

1. INTRODUCTION

The article presents the results of a qualitative research aimed at identifying if the digitisation imposed on social services by the Covid-19 pandemic was a transitory change, whose effects would fade at the end of the pandemic, or a long-term one that resulted in learning processes that innovated their organizational knowledge. In fact, not every change is an innovation. Change can remain on the surface of organizations and does not get their core, that is their proof culture made of values, assumptions and knowledge (Schein & Schein, 1999). Whereas change is a continuous process of introducing a difference, innovation is a particular type of change that introduces a difference that is perceived, i.e. recognised and considered significant by stakeholders in the context where it occurs. It takes the form of an interpretative process of sensemaking (Weick, 1995) conducted *a posteriori* by the stakeholders. The relevance of an innovation is not so much linked to technology as to the organisational culture and refers mainly to a change of frame, i.e. of perspective, in the activity of an organisation or in the way an asset or service is used by users. Several authors highlight the close link between innovation and organisational knowledge, emphasising how every innovative process is fed by an organisation's knowledge and contributes, in turn, to expanding and revising that knowledge (Schulze & Hoegl, 2008; Popadiuk & Choo, 2006; Esterhuizen et al., 2012). According to the practice-based approach to organisational knowledge (Gherardi, 2000a, 2000b; Gherardi & Nicolini, 2004), organising is learning and organising is involved in learning, meaning that knowledge arises primarily from action, i.e. from practice. Organisational knowledge is therefore rooted in everyday practices, i.e. within the relational context in which it is acquired, reproduced and negotiated through participation in the activities promoted by communities of practice. In social work practice, new approaches or processes must also reflect the values that underpin social work. Hence innovations must focus on social value, targeting social needs and problems, in ways that go beyond financial or economic gains (Traube et al., 2017). Social work, in fact, would make a unique contribution to the enhancement of social innovation through the weight given to values, social purpose, and context that is endemic to the social work perspective (Flynn, 2017). In social work, however, innovation is fundamentally hindered by the foundational trifecta on which the profession is built: the structure of social work education, diffusely focused professional organisations, and siloed professional environments (Traube et al., 2017). The research offered in the following sections is based on the hypothesis that digitalisation can represent an opportunity to

innovate social services (Berzin et al., 2015) to the extent that ICT is a tool to promote social workers' reflexivity and organisational learning.

Since their first introduction in social work, ICT has been considered with a certain suspicion, in particular due to several aspects: the risk of standardizing instead of personalizing the relationship between social worker and user, categorizing users into abstract categories that are disconnected from their life context, making the process of collecting and analyzing information necessary for the assessment and planning mechanical and static instead of reflective and dynamic, and introducing hidden remote surveillance and control mechanisms (Postle, 2002; Parton, 2009; Bullock & Colvin, 2015; Nordesjö et al., 2022).

The use of digital tools has created numerous ethical challenges regarding the social work concepts of client informed consent; client privacy and confidentiality; boundaries and dual relationships; conflicts of interest; practitioner competence; records and documentation; and collegial relationships (Reamer, 2023). These factors have obstacled the acceptance and diffusion of ICTs in social work. Hence, the use of many ICTs, such as social networks, is still a challenge for social work organizations (Castillo de Mesa et al., 2022). As highlighted by Hong and Synnøve (2021a) by using Rogers' theory (2010), the diffusion and acceptance of new ICT-mediated practice depend on how implemented ICT can be compatible with social workers' needs towards face-to-face intervention with at-risk population, how standardized data system can ensure the quality of case proceeding and in the meanwhile enable professionals' flexibility and autonomy, and how many resources and competence for supporting users' digital inclusion and overcoming digital exclusion will be available.

The massive use of ICT imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, forcing social workers to make use of these tools to give continuity to services, has fostered a better understanding of the potential and the possibilities of using them in a sustainable way. Technologies as well as innovation processes are not neutral (López Peláez, 2014). «The digitalization of our societies is not neutral either: e-government generates opportunities, but also barriers to access, and the digital access and access gap become predictors of social exclusion» (López Peláez & Kirwan, 2023, p. 516). Hence, the importance of comparative research on digitalization processes accelerated by Covid-19, both within Italy and in a cross-country perspective (López Peláez et al., 2023). The consequences of innovation models, digitalization, data processing and changes in the field of social intervention will be long-lasting and will generate new opportunities and new risks, and of course, exclusion, as in the case today not only with the digital divide access, but also of digital vulnerability both of users of social

services, as well as of the social workers themselves (López Peláez et al., 2023; Castillo de Mesa et al., 2020, 2021).

As Mishna and colleagues (2021) pointed out the Covid-19 pandemic led to a paradigm shift in the use of ICTs characterised by an acknowledgement of the multiple options they offer, the adoption of more user-centred practices and the development of creativity in their use. Despite this paradigm shift, the «ongoing digitalization holds great promise for social work and social inclusion, but there are also multiple challenges that should not be overlooked if we want to make better progress», such as the protection of citizens' rights, the improvement of social services provision through digitalisation, the skill development required for bridging the digital divide (López Peláez et al. 2023, pp. xiii-xiv). The speed at which the digital transformation has occurred has not only left gaps in the skills and abilities of service users, especially those who are more disadvantaged, but also those of professionals. Moreover, the urgency with which the digitisation of social services took place during the pandemic and the one that is accompanying its implementation required by the NextGenerationEU Strategy risk to become a mere technological change, inspired by the managerial logic aimed at pursuing efficiency and cost containment rather than effectiveness and improvement of social services. Hence, «the digital training of service users as well as of social workers must be recognized as a key strategy to enable both groups to take on the challenges of the digital transformation of society» (Castillo de Mesa, 2023, p. 282).

These issues led us to verify whether these tensions are still present in the Italian context or whether the paradigm shift found by Mishna and colleagues has taken place following Covid-19. Italy, in fact, is a country that is lagging behind in digitisation, both in terms of activation of services and infrastructures to facilitate the spread of technologies, acquisition of digital skills by the population, and the perception of the usefulness of these tools (Di Rosa et al., 2018, 2019). The first evidence (Sanfelici et al., 2020) collected during the pandemic has shown the unpreparedness of both professionals and agencies in the use of digital technologies, the unavailability of platforms, smartphones, or adequate broadband connections. Improvisation and common sense were the main guides of social workers, some of them were «skeptical», describing a «forced» use of digital technologies, while others highlighted instead the «discovery» of the potentials of digital tools. These latter helped both social workers and people to stay connected; virtual interviews with individual and groups have been particularly effective with more vulnerable people; in residential settings, video calls have allowed residents to communicate with family members and online platforms have been used to carry on activities with

unemployed people. With the research described in the following sections, we wanted to see if these new ways of working with ICT introduced during the pandemic represented an effective innovation of social services, i.e. if they were maintained at the end of the emergency and if their use promoted a change in the approach of social workers to ICT and in their use in daily practice.

2. METHODOLOGY

In order to achieve cognitive objectives illustrated in the previous section, an exploratory research was carried out prior to subsequent in-depth studies. A qualitative approach (Silverman, 1997) was adopted aimed at detecting the point of view of social service managers regarding digitalisation of social work activities.

It covered all 18 social service areas into which the Friuli Venezia Giulia, a region in the North East of Italy, is divided.

The tool used was a semi-structured interview (Bichi, 2002), in which interviewees were asked the following open-ended questions: which ICTs had been introduced in their organisation during the pandemic and for which types of users; how they had been received by operators and users; whether and which training and/or support initiatives had been organised and for whom; whether and which organisational adaptations had been made to accompany the introduction of ICTs; what the outcomes of their use had been – and whether it had been maintained after the pandemic.

The interviews were preceded by an e-mail and telephone contact to explain the objectives of the research and ask people if they were willing to be interviewed. Sixteen managers agreed to take part in the survey, while two did not respond to repeated telephone and e-mail requests.

The interviews were conducted between the end of May and the end of July 2023, face-to-face in five cases and online in 11 cases. They were recorded and lasted an average of 40 minutes. The recordings and full transcripts of the interviews are stored in the repository of the University of Trieste. To ensure anonymity, the interviews were cleaned of any reference that could lead them back to the interviewee and were coded with an alphanumeric abbreviation (AS followed by a progressive number).

The recordings were transcribed and analysed following the interview questions (Bichi, 2002): each interview was analysed individually following the grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006) in order to identify and codify core topics regarding the research questions; individual core topics were then grouped by topic and analysed as a whole.

3. RESULTS

In this section, the main topics that emerged from the analysis of the interviews are presented and illustrated by excerpts from the transcripts of the interviews.

3.1. Acceptance of digital technologies by social workers and services' users

Although it was the first time that digital technologies were used, and by some they had been given little consideration or even «dismissed» (AS6), cases of «resistance» (AS11) – incidentally described as referring to any process of change – and «reluctance» (AS4) were very few and limited to contexts where there was a greater presence of middle-aged social workers, who are not used to using digital technologies even in their private lives. The presence of young social workers encouraged the introduction of these new tools, even though it cannot be taken for granted, as we learned in some settings, youngsters are not necessarily naturally predisposed to their use. In the end, even the most resistant and reluctant were forced to comply due to the absence of other ways of providing a minimum of continuity of service and the mandatory organisational requirements (AS11, AS12). The social workers predominantly welcomed the technology, with «interest» (AS1, AS6), «curiosity» (AS6), even «enthusiasm» (AS1), making themselves available «beyond expectations» (AS6) to learn and in several cases to be taught by their often-younger colleagues (AS3).

With reference to users, several interviewees reported that users were willing to use digital technologies and possessed unexpected skills in this area. Users in general and also a significant proportion of the elderly were very familiar with various technologies, particularly those needed to use various services, such as postal services and banking services. This meant they could use the applications made available to them and were also able to appreciate the benefits in terms of saving time and travel.

> We made the great discovery that people are actually able to get themselves organised in this area. There would always be someone who did not know what to do, but the services' doors were always open and operators help people. We also need to consider that the whole world went online during that period […] This opened the floodgates so that older people started to ask to be taught computer literacy (AS6)

> The target group of the elderly is perhaps the one that needs most help to go online, but this target group made very limited use of it, we were mainly in touch with family members, there was no need for a direct and targeted connection with the elderly. We certainly need to do some thinking around this target. They are using smartphones and getting to grips with the Italian

> digital public identity system (SPID). Conducting an analysis focussing on this target could bring some interesting insights. […] there is room for development. (AS5)

Nevertheless, many respondents pointed out that a significant proportion of users (especially elderly and disadvantaged people) have neither digital tools nor the necessary skills to use them, and have asked to be helped.

> This situation also prompted users to digitise. It used to seem brutal to require people to have SPID, but nowadays if you don't have SPID […]. People have managed to use it, but we have always maintained an exit strategy in the sense that we have ensured that people who struggle can access services face-to-face with the specific intention of protecting citizens' right to submit their request in the form that suits them best. (AS8)

3.2. Modalities of learning and support for the use of digital technologies

In all contexts, the urgency of the moment did not allow for any training, let alone training in the use of digital technologies. Instead, these were learned informally, through a process of self-learning in which more computer-literate social workers helped those who were less able and more awkward to overcome the difficulties. These were not particularly significant given that the skills required at the time were rather elementary: «all you have to do is press the button, you know you have to put the link, and that's more or less it» (AS2).

Nevertheless, it has been a fairly significant effort, especially for older social workers who are less accustomed to the use of new technologies, even privately. Much easier, on the other hand, were the younger social workers who grew up in environments characterized by a widespread presence of new technologies with which they had been able to familiarize themselves before the pandemic.

3.3. Areas of application of digital technologies

The analysis of the interviews revealed that the introduction of digital technologies during the pandemic found most of the services in the region unprepared. This was because they had not used them up to that point and, in some cases, had looked at them «with prejudice» and had not «given them much consideration» (AS3) or had even «dismissed» them (AS6). In one particular setting it was reported that the tools introduced during the pandemic were already being used so there was nothing new (AS15). However, in another it was reported that:

> We'd never made such massive use of phone calls and so on. We had never used WhatsApp before, although we had held workshops on the use of smartphones for old people. It seemed that they could be powerful tools for our senior clients so we set up partnerships with certain groups and companies that deal with these things here. We can say that the use of certain things we had previously only used at embryonic level really took off. (AS13)

In most cases, it involved adopting platforms that could be used to communicate and hold working meetings within one's own organisation and with other organisations, to give citizens access to the provision of services and benefits, and, more rarely, to carry out the activities and interventions required for services to take charge of users. Videoconferences and video calls for meetings and service communications were used extensively and intensively. This was particularly true following the introduction of remote working. This was the most significant innovation for all services and required everyone to equip themselves with computer apps and procedures for data transfer that were not in place before.

Platforms for users to submit applications for activation of services and interventions were widely used. These tools were already present in all services for the provision of certain regional and national measures of a relevant administrative nature and not subject to social assessment. They were also implemented in some contexts for the provision of economic support grants activated specifically for the pandemic.

Telephones and mobile phones were mainly used to communicate with users. Telephones were generally used to monitor elderly home care service users and, in some cases, to activate dedicated numbers that could be used to reach potential users in general. In one case, the dedicated numbers were an enhancement of the social secretariat service already activated by telephone, while in two other settings it was an opportunity to set up an emergency rapid response service in one case and a citizens' advice service in another. In a number of settings, e-mail was also used as a tool to communicate appointments as well as intake-related content, to transmit forms relating to the activation of services, and in one context (AS8) also for the provision of financial contributions in the form of vouchers that can be spent at shops.

In many contexts, this has led to a '*discovery*' of the other side of digital technologies, that of working tools that enable business meetings, contributions, data and document sharing. It was, however, a '*discovery*' that some managers referred to as «blindingly obvious» (AS6, AS2), suggesting that they could have done it sooner and confirming the Italian social services, and other areas are backward in using them. This finding, however, only concerned the application of digital technologies to activities of an organisational nature and

those related to standard interventions that do not require a particular interaction and relationship with users.

When taking charge of users, in fact, the most commonly used technologies were telephone and mobile phones. These were mainly used to make phone and video calls in order to carry out monitoring interviews and, in some cases, also assessment for the activation of services such as home care or for the provision of contributions. Mobile phone video calls were used in social and educational interventions for children and in some contexts also for adults involved in social and occupational integration, for interviews with children in the community and their parents, and for the activation and/or monitoring of home care service interventions in cases where the elderly person and/or their family member required communication accompanied by visual support and was able to use the mobile phone for this purpose. Platforms were used in some contexts to support the online teaching of children and young people with disabilities and in difficult conditions receiving support from the social and educational service, and for social and educational actions to help adults involved in work placement pathways. For this purpose, videoconference team meetings were held in which users participated. Users were hosted in the social service headquarters when they did not have a PC or did not know how to use one without help.

In general, the introduction of digital technologies mainly concerned the strengthening and improvement of organisational processes and activities, and partially concerned user-facing activities.

Professional social service activities conducted directly with users, such as interviews and home visits, were mainly limited to using mobile phones and in some cases platforms to see the person as well as speak to them, thus exploiting the communicative opportunities offered by non-verbal facial expressions. At the end of the pandemic, however, face-to-face operations resumed and online interactions were kept only for exceptional circumstances.

Conversely, the use of platforms for videoconferences and video calls between operators has now become standard practice, routinely used and often preferred over face-to-face meetings, mainly because of the advantages in terms of time and travel savings it allows, making it much easier to schedule meetings. The following testimony is typical of what we found in other contexts:

> We often hold meetings online because it helps everyone. Organisationally it is much easier. […] So we continue to use it on a day-to-day basis, e.g. for the monitoring meetings on the home care service's socio-educational interventions: when we have meetings to review the reports, we don't do them in person anymore. […] The easiest thing is to do it online so as not to waste time, because you can talk just the same, and it's easier because it is more

> immediate. Online meetings and online organisation are consistently the first choice among operators. […] Sometimes they even ask us: «We're doing it online, aren't we?». (AS4)

Videoconferencing has led to an improvement in work processes in terms of quality as well as efficiency. It has led to a better focus on the objectives, contents and outcomes of meetings, paving the way for the introduction of new working tools that would be useful for face-to-face meetings as well.

> The knock-on effects on activities are definitely time-saving, making for a better utilisation of our working time. At the end of the meetings, minute-taking was introduced or stepped up, whereas in face-to-face meetings everyone took their own notes and there were no minutes. It works for the team meetings, not always for the other meetings. This mechanism is triggered when you hold a meeting online. It should also be triggered when you hold a meeting face-to-face but this is not always the case. (AS11)

3.4. Digitalisation in the relationship between social worker and user

As described above, throughout the pandemic, the use of ICT in social workers' actions carried out as part of the caring process, such as interviews and home visits, was limited to telephone interviews and video calls. These were abandoned as soon as the emergency phase was over in order to go back to face-to-face meetings. All interviewees considered face-to-face meetings to be an indispensable component of the professional social worker-service user relationship. They regarded the use of ICT as something ancillary, to be used only as an extreme option if face-to-face meetings simply were not possible. Their use during the pandemic was a «*stretch*» because «we were missing the physical, and visual contact that you get in person so we went back to face-to-face meetings in all cases» (AS2). During the process of taking charge of users, therefore, ICT was considered an «exceptional option» (AS1), «an option, but a remote one, in case of need» (AS2) because «taking charge requires a direct relationship and can only go through this intermediary in certain moments of absolute constraints, such as lockdowns, otherwise a direct relationship is preferred» (AS5).

Social service is regarded as an activity that «necessarily requires the chemistry of meeting» (AS1), a «personal support service» (AS11) that necessarily requires the presence of the practitioner (AS12).

> When you do a social service interview and go to the person's home you see a whole series of things and make a series of connections and that is part of your job. […] Some things can be done remotely, the meetings with the hospital for example. But when it comes to meeting a foster family you can't do it remotely, there must be some empathy, otherwise it's too impersonal. A

> human relationship is a human relationship. I cannot think that the future will just be the mobile phone. We work with people, we have to know them, see them, even smell them, see if they have washed, […] (AS11).

ICTs are therefore still seen as something external that adds to the relationship between social worker and user, not as something that can be used in its own right and can complement it. Only one of the interviewees glimpsed this possibility, as is evident from their words:

> With people I honestly struggle to imagine working with new technologies, although there might be a new role in the future that I can't really see right now. New technologies could help to improve the relationship with people, to have more contacts, but at this stage I am still stuck in the traditional helping relationship. (AS7)

3.5. Ethical issues and open questions

From the analysis of the interviews, several ethical issues related to the use of digital technologies emerged, on which operators say they feel confused and do not know how to behave.

The first dilemma that interviewees reported was where to place the boundary of the relationship between operator and user so that it can be considered personalised while respecting the institutional nature of the setting within which it takes place and at the same time safeguarding the confidentiality of the information about the user that is transmitted.

> We were faced with this dilemma: do operators who use remote connections use the social worker's personal e-mail, which is more immediate and recognisable, or an institutional e-mail that can be seen by several people? It is true that forwarding a personal e-mail greatly facilitates the relationship because the person is a recognisable individual from the institution and therefore it is easier for them to ask questions and communicate. However, this begs the question: if the operator is not present, who reads the e-mails? If the operator is not present or for any other reason no longer comes to work, his or her e-mail is no longer active and there is a risk that the information will not be tracked. The other issue is the over-personalisation of communications because we must not forget the institution behind the operator. (AS6)

A second ethical issue that emerged concerns the need to gauge the use of ICTs with respect to the actual capabilities of the user to use the services but also to understand the content being transmitted, which may take longer than the specific technology used allows. Therefore, there is a need to be able to diversify the use of technological tools according to users and their circumstances.

> From the perspective of the future of social work, it is good not to take things for granted, to place great emphasis on listening and respecting the other

> person's time. With new technologies, there is a risk that people who use them all the time will take for granted certain steps that are not taken for granted by the other person. […] As professionals we must have the ability, when it comes to diversifying our tools, to always gauge their use in relation to the users, otherwise there is a risk of standardisation and this is not an option for a social service […]. (AS5)

This issue is linked to that of unequal opportunities for users to access ICTs and the consequent risk that they will be excluded from access to services if these are only delivered digitally.

> […] protection of access to services: the social worker and the organisation should create forms of support that make things easier for those who have the tools and do not want to go physically to the public office to make an application, enabling them to do so online. Conversely, there must be a guarantee that those who cannot do so are not penalised. This in my opinion will be an issue to be taken seriously as a profession because there will be more and more digitised services and therefore people should be helped to implement digital skills and also create services that still allow these people to access online applications. (AS7)

Finally, there is a pressing need to ensure we protect the privacy of users' data.

> Another issue is that of data security, […] we logged on using our private networks and it was not always easy to access the data we had at headquarters. […] The issue of security is very important because if there is no filter to ensure security, we could be hacked through our personal devices. (AS7)

4. DISCUSSION

The first point to emerge from the results described above is the backwardness of the social services investigated in terms of the technological equipment and digital skills needed for the digitisation process forced upon them by the pandemic. This reflects the delay with which ICTs were introduced into Italian social services (Di Rosa et al., 2019), the lack of computer literacy on the part of social workers and their unwillingness to engage with ICTs before the pandemic (Di Rosa et al., 2018). Nevertheless, the analysis of the interviews revealed the great willingness and ability of social workers to cope with these difficulties and backwardness to overcome the emergency by ensuring the continuity of the service and the protection of users, especially the most vulnerable (Sanfelici *et al.* 2020). In the end, though, curiosity, interest and willingness to learn prevailed, ultimately leading to good acceptance and dissemination (Rogers, 2010).

The main lesson learned by operators during the pandemic was the potential for using ICT for work, particularly for the management of meetings, the

sharing of data and documents between operators and with users, and for user access to certain services and benefits. The operators became so familiar with ICT that their use became common practice. They were appreciated and used rationally to meet specific ad hoc needs. The usefulness of the tool and its ease of use were further confirmed as powerful factors favouring its acceptance and dissemination (Rogers, 2010). It is undoubtedly a major achievement, and can be considered not only a change but a real innovation that has developed new ways of thinking and using new technologies, which appear as a new organizational knowledge (Esterhuizen, Schutte, Du Toit, 2012; Gherardi, 2000a, b; Gherardi & Nicolini, 2004; Popadiuk & Choo, 2006; Schulze & Hoegl, 2008; Weick, 1995). Nevertheless, at the same time, it hides the risk to foster a managerial approach to digitisation that is aimed to harness ICTs' application only to improve social services efficiency, mainly saving time and costs of working meetings (Parton, 2009; Gillingham & Graham, 2016).

On the other hand, the tendency found among the interviewees to use new technologies to improve direct intervention and the relationship with the user was much more limited. We saw that the majority of them consider new technologies to be tools for implementing remote interventions as an additional, secondary and residual option as opposed to face-to-face intervention, which remains the priority and self-contained. While remote intervention is considered partial, face-to-face intervention is considered complete in its own right. Interviewees did not consider that it could also be seen as partial and therefore able to be supplemented by a remote intervention, as part of a mutually complementary process as emerged from various studies which highlighted the benefits and limitations that ITCs can offer to developing and sustaining relationality and relationship-based practice with service users (Byrne & Kirwan, 2019). As pointed out by Pink et al. (2022), «digital social work should be understood and developed as a hybrid, anticipatory and flexible practice. By 'hybrid' we mean that digital social work is both digital and physical simultaneously. By 'anticipatory' we refer to how social workers engaged with digital media and technologies while thinking ahead towards future in-person visit in relation to the safety or risk of the families they worked with» (p. 415). From this point of view, the change detected by our research does not seem to be considered a real innovation as it has not represented a significant discontinuity from to the previous way of considering and carrying out the relationship with the person. In fact, it continues to be considered as properly practicable only in presence. On the one hand, as highlighted by Castillo de Mesa (2023), this can be attributed to the fact that Tele-social work, which encompasses remote assistance and online home visit, presents several aspects that need to

be clarified, for example, when digital media or conventional face-to-face care should be used and what are the most suitable means to use, and requires special attention to recognize the presence of any digital gap on the part of service users. On the other hand, as will be discussed later, this can be at least partly attributed to the fact that the use of ICTs was not accompanied by training that supported processes of reflection (Schön, 1983) about practice that would help practitioners to reflect on the new practice and on its immediate and potential effects. Scholars agree on the importance of digital skills for both service users and social workers to ensure successful interventions. Moreover, social workers and users can act as mutual drivers in the process of improving their digital skills, as López Peláez et colleagues (2020) highlighted with regard to training initiatives promoted by social work targeted at young people.

In general, our interviewees appear more willing to adopt technology than to integrate it into social work practice. This, however, may be due to the fact that the use of new technologies took place mainly during the emergency period in which what mattered was to give a timely response with the tools immediately available, and social workers did not yet have time to reflect and think about further ways of using new technologies. Even the informal and self-learning process with which the social workers learned to use these tools, as will be discussed later, may have encouraged the adoption of a passive rather than an active attitude. In any case, this is an aspect to be deepened with further research that also reveals the point of view of social workers directly involved in the provision of services who were not interviewed in this preliminary research.

Another remarkable finding emerged from the analysis concerns the image of users. The pandemic helped to spread a less stereotypical view that more accurately reflects people's actual digital skills and their willingness to use ICTs to access services. The respondents' accounts are in line with what was found, for example, by Simpson (2017) among adult and adolescent users, and by Hodge and colleagues (2017) among the elderly population in rural areas. Respondents therefore feel the need to adapt the way they communicate and access social services to a user base that is largely in favour of and willing to make use of digital technologies. Respondents, however, are aware that this availability and competence of the users, although greater than expected, concerns only a part of the users. So, they still feel strong concerns about those who are unable to access new technologies or find it difficult to use them, as well as the protection of their privacy.

Social workers tend to maintain a paternalistic attitude to their clients that leads them to advocate maintaining the dual channel – direct access and

online access – rather than coming up with new ways of using technology. The needs of users who are more adept at using new technologies continue to be serviced in various contexts by extending the use of platforms. A lesson was learned in this case too, but this time involving the use of a predefined tool. The social services simply adapted to the tool without thinking about how it could adapt that tool to its own specific needs and those of its users. This is confirmed by the fact that the activation of information, secretarial and social emergency services in some contexts involved using the telephone and not advanced digital technologies. This attitude could also be due to the emergency context in which the use of new technologies took place and the ways in which it was learned. Nevertheless, it needs to be deepened, exploring in particular the impact that the material technological dimension of new technologies and their functionality can have on this aspect. The dimensions of technological materiality and functionality and how they intersect with the practice of relationship-based social work need to be explored, as different tools can either broaden or constrict the ways in which they are useful in social work practice (Kirwan, 2023).

As anticipated, the results described so far seem to be attributable, at least in part, to the ways in which social workers have learned to use new technologies. It has been seen that this has been done through an informal process of self-learning that arose spontaneously in many contexts. Operators were able to use digital technologies without specific training. They either taught themselves or asked their more experienced colleagues for help. This means that small communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) developed where social workers shared a common commitment to a shared goal characterised by the acquisition of new skills and working practices. On one hand, these communities had been a valid tool – and still may be in the future – to help practitioners discover the opportunities offered by ICTs. On the other hand, while this realisation may make them more likely to use other technologies or progress to a higher level in the ones they know, it could also lead them to believe that no training is necessary in the use of ICTs, reinforcing the perception of their inferiority and causing them to be seen as an add-on compared to other types of know-how (Cabiati, 2022[1]). Instead, structured and specific training is necessary to develop a conscious, critical and reflective use of digital technologies, to ensure users are capable of grasping their limits but also of exploiting their unseen potential in an ethically and professionally correct manner, as many

1 Cabiati, E. (19 February 2024). Digitalizzazione e social work [Digitization and Social Work]. *Prospettive Sociali e Sanitarie*. https://www.welforum.it/il-punto/welfare-digitale-servizio-sociale-e-gap-formativo/digitalizzazione-e-social-work/

experiences are already doing (Aparicio & Sánchez, 2023; Byrne, 2023; Jewell et al., 2021; Hong & Synnøve, 2021a).

Finally, the results seem to highlight the maturation of two of the characteristics required for digital skills in social work, namely being secure and being critical (Hong & Synnøve, 2021b). Several social service managers highlighted the attention that is duly paid to the protection of users' privacy and confidentiality and also to making rational use of digital technologies, i.e. adjusted to the type of users involved, the context of use and the content processed. In this regard, their concerns arose regarding the correct methods of behaviour to be followed and the need to receive clearer and more shared information and indications both from the professional community and from their own organization (Boddy & Dominelli 2017).

What seems to be missing, however, is the third characteristic, namely creativity. This concerns the ability to go beyond using the tools simply to transpose traditional interventions into digital format, and instead to experiment with new ways of intervening. Its development requires to strive and intensify the search for new teaching methods, in line with the practice of reflexivity and innovation typical of the social work profession (Di Rosa & Sanfelici, 2023).

5. CONCLUSIONS

The goal of the research was exploratory and descriptive with a view to conducting further investigation in the future. Its results are therefore partial, also because it limited itself to surveying the views of social service managers without also gathering the views of social workers directly involved in service delivery. Nevertheless, the results that were obtained seem interesting and useful to increase the knowledge available on this topic. They confirm the potential for innovation and thus organisational learning that ICTs can offer social services. For this to happen, they highlight the urgency of accompanying the digitisation processes of social services with specific ongoing training courses capable of developing not only social workers' digital skills but also their reflexivity on the way in which ICTs are introduced and implemented. The risk, in fact, is that the digitisation of social services pursues only efficiency objectives inspired by a managerial logic, and forgets improving direct intervention with users. In order to avoid this, it is necessary for social workers to take an active and proactive attitude towards ICTs and to take an active part in the paths by which they are introduced into organizations. Only with their direct contribution ICTs will be tools fit to generate social well-being and social inclusion. Social workers' contribution in digitisation, in fact, will be crucial to

assure that it will not result in further exclusion of social services users, paying attention to overcome the existing digital divide on access and digital divide on use that affect too many people. Moreover, it will be important to implement the evaluation of the experiences of digitisation, paying special attention to recognize the specific results and impact of different technologies on different target of service users, professionals and their relationship. This will contribute to enrich the knowledge at disposal with new content, and shape a science of social work in the digital society.

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