

Chapter 1

Digital Juncture: A Model for Social Work Ethics and Practice

Elizabeth DePoy

University of Maine, USA

Stephen French Gilson

University of Maine, USA

ABSTRACT

Challenged by the pandemic and its future aftermath, social work has been forced to relocate its relational social change mission and action to a new address, replacing a physical location with a URL. The need for digital accessibility thus has rapidly appeared and is now a major squeaky wheel in the profession. In order to make this move while upholding the professional mission of full inclusion, this chapter proposes a model of progressive digital accessibility. A synthetic framework marrying disjuncture theory and pragmatist ethics provides a rich foundation from which forensic analysis can expose and capitalize on “what is wrong,” disrupt business as usual, and innovate to achieve accessibility that is fluid, just, and worthy of social work leadership.

INTRODUCTION

From micro clinical intervention to macro policy practice, social work relies on the synthesis of relationship and interaction that “confronts central philosophical questions around who we are and how we are with others”. Although recently there has been some integration of digital strategies into social work practice, the pandemic has forced the profession’s hand, demanding a rapid relocation of typical social work face-to-face praxis into virtual environments. Given the relational, interactive, eye-contact, history of social work, it is dissonant to think about social work activity now occurring in screen mediated, artificially intelligent, virtual, environments which house emojis, sound-bytes, social media, but not enflashed bodies themselves. Regardless of even the most recent efforts to digitize small nooks and crannies of practice, social work is now obliged to disrupt in-person practice activity, renegotiate, and relocate it to socially distanced contexts, posing both challenge and opportunity for new complex mod-

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els of digital practice. Of particular concern is how social workers across the globe can engage digital practice to the full complement of clients and professional roles, given how “disabled” social work has been in the virtual world. The chapter thus analyzes the profession of social work, social work knowledge dissemination, and development enterprises, and social work practice itself as contextually disabled in the virtual world, and borrows from progressive disability studies theory and praxis to provide guidelines for remediation, advancement, and ultimate survival.

Given new interactive theory in disability studies, this important literature provides analysis, principles and praxis guidance and exemplars. But before visiting that theoretical landscape, a visit with digital disability in social work both before and during the Covid -19 pandemic is in order.

THE RECENT AND CURRENT TECHNOLOGICAL WORLD OF SOCIAL WORK

That Thinkpad, the Apple II, the Commodore may seem like distant memories and fodder for museum exhibits illuminates three important points about the intersection, or not, of the digital world and social work:

1. Personal computing and all that follows are not new.
2. Social work has been lagging behind in technology uptake.
3. The pandemic has forced social work to move off of its face-to-face center.

The following sage words from Curator (2020) demonstrate this Push-me pull-you kerfuffle:

Technology is set to have a profound impact on the way clients interact with social workers, and how social workers approach their work. For the most part, these changes should be beneficial. However, social workers will also need to adapt, and will need to acquire a whole new set of skills if they don't want to be rendered obsolete. Only those that will be able to stay on top of these changes and learn how to use them to their advantage will be able to thrive.

The key terms in the Curator narrative above are “beneficial” and “adaptation”. The benefit first must be recognized in a profession that has held the proverbial professional hug as its hallmark, and then the adaptation must be swift, ethical, and effective in meeting social work goals and objectives, notwithstanding its own survival.

Clearly the pandemic, through its public health mechanism of social distancing, has elevated technological interaction as the primary tool of human contact not only in social work but way beyond. Contrary to previous awfulized predictions of screen-inflicted social isolation, the tables are now not only turned, but fully upended. According to the research conducted by Goldkind, Wold, & Freddolino (2019), when

..asked to consider what life will be like in 2025 in the wake of the outbreak of the global pandemic and other crises in 2020, some 915 innovators, developers, business and policy leaders, researchers and activists responded. Their broad and nearly universal view is that people's relationship with technology will deepen as larger segments of the population come to rely more on digital connections for work, education, health care, daily commercial transactions and essential social interactions. A number describe this as a “tele-everything” world.

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