

Editorial

Special Issue on Social Work in the Time of COVID-19: Focus on Impacts on Clients and Consequences for Practice and Profession

by

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Introduction

We are pleased to present the second volume of the special issue on social work in the time of COVID-19. The two volumes are a result of the collaboration within the University of the Arctic (UArctic) Thematic Network on Social Work (TNSWK) and the Journal of Comparative Social Work (see also Allen, Gonzalez, & Sauer 2021).

The articles in the two volumes are time documents from the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, and highlight different dimensions of social work during the pandemic crisis. As also described in the first volume of this special issue (Allen, Gonzalez, & Sauer 2021), this present volume provides an opportunity to read research experiences on social work and social work education related to COVID-19 during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The social work profession globally adapted to the challenges imposed by the pandemic; the two volumes of this special edition offer social workers a comparison of how social workers in different nations found solutions, struggled with similar worries and acknowledged the parallel trauma of living, working and adapting to life through a global pandemic. The articles deal with social work practice, comparative analysis between different countries and social work related to the consequences of COVID-19, as well as the consequences for social workers and different target groups. In this volume of the special issue, the articles explore these experiences across two themes: impacts on clients and consequences for social work practice and the global profession.

Impacts on Clients

During the first wave of the pandemic, social workers globally sought to study how decisions were being made regarding service delivery for vulnerable clients, including people with disabilities and children. Obstacles, such as community lockdowns, school and social service closures, increased COVID-19 infection rates and high mortality rates continued to persist, which created barriers for social workers to conduct face-to-face assessments, and for clients to access services from social services organizations. In their article, *The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the social work client base*, authors Bastaits, Pastel, Massart and Put explore social workers' decisions-making processes in Belgium. The article discusses results from a study of 1,850 Belgian social workers. The study explored which clients were prioritized during the first wave of the pandemic and which clients were not reached,

and asked social workers if the pandemic had changed their client base (new clients seeking services due to the pandemic).

In their article, *The inclusive, social space-oriented participation of people with disabilities in the Bavaria–Tyrol border region during the COVID-19 pandemic*, Kerschbaumer, Gell, Nesimovic and Weinkogl analyse the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for persons with disabilities living in the Bavaria (Germany) – Tyrol (Austria) border region. The aim was to identify factors that have enabled or constrained the individual agency of people with disabilities before and during the pandemic. The empirical material is generated through interviews with 34 participants (people with disabilities, their relatives, employers and administrators) and a qualitative online survey with 51 participants. The results illustrate that people with disabilities in the Tyrol–Bavaria border region experienced service deficits (limits to assistance, border closings and limited access), limited mobility (reduction of public transportation) and limited services due to limited funding for services. Furthermore, the findings show information mismanagement. There was a lack of information with essential importance such as services, providers, funding for services, support, legal conditions for cross-border services, education and employment. The quality and accuracy of information about COVID-19 was inconsistent, and there was limited information about COVID-19 available in barrier-free formats, e.g., easy to read text, sign language or braille. The possibility of self-determination for persons with a disability was even more limited due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and employers lacked resources for adaptations in the workplace or on-the-job assistance for hiring people with disabilities, since they were placed in at-risk groups for COVID-19.

Gunnarsdottir, Wilson and Enoksen explore the effects of school closures during COVID-19 on the social and emotional experience of children in their article, *Maybe I can go back to school in a few weeks*. They collected diaries of 10 students who documented their days during a school closure for three days in a row. Through a thematic analysis process, they found that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted students across important social arenas, including home and family life, school and learning activities, and social and digital interaction with peers. They found that macro-level issues, such as poverty and inequality, influenced the family's ability to

cope, and that children demonstrated the capacity to adapt to COVID-19 school closures when they were supported by the family.

Consequences for Practice and the Profession

Social workers have experienced ethical and practice-related challenges throughout the COVID-19 pandemic across multiple aspects of social work practice, such as contact and communication with clients, privacy and confidentiality, restrictions against clients, use of technology, working conditions and personal health and social-emotional well-being at work. In their article, *Ethical challenges experienced by gerontological social workers in Finland during the COVID-19 pandemic*, Ylinen, Ylinen, Kallioma-Puha and Ylinen explore ethical issues experienced by gerontological social workers in Finland through semi-structured interviews with nine social workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through a theory guided content analysis, the authors report that the closure of elder services presented multiple ethical challenges for gerontological social workers, as they could not fully support the health and well-being of their older clients when service centres were closed. Social workers transitioned to remote services, which contributed to social workers' concerns about maintaining privacy and confidentiality, meeting clients' needs and feeling lonely and unsupported by coworkers.

The article, *Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the work of social workers - a comparison between Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands*, authored by Schell-Kiehl, Laurens, Ketelaar, Sommerfeld, Hess, Bühler, Meyer and Franz is a cross-sectional study of 7,241 social workers in Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands during the 2nd wave of the pandemic. The data was collected via an online survey, and examined the following four dimensions: contact and communication with clients, the acceptance of technology, positive changes and innovations, and the working conditions and psychosocial risks of professionals. The authors found that communication with clients changed (e.g. less contact and contact via phone), which had a negative impact on communication. They also found that social workers reported a high knowledge of technology, and that the use of technology and innovation had many benefits, such as the ability to combine work and private tasks, less travel time, and that videoconferences are efficient and easier to coordinate. However, they also identified challenges, including increased workloads, risks for

mental health problems, emotional exhaustion and challenges with balancing work and family. With the words of the authors, *there are remarkable and alarming results concerning the mental health condition of the social work workforce and their working conditions*

The articles collected in this special volume illustrate the ability of social work professionals and clients to adapt services during a pandemic. The pandemic posed a challenge for the profession of social workers regarding how services would be delivered, but it also highlighted how social workers were viewed as essential or nonessential workers during the pandemic by the government. Øydgard and Pedersen's article, *When crisis strikes - Changes in work and professional identity among social workers in Norwegian Child Welfare Protection services during COVID-19*, explores how the professional identity of Norwegian child welfare social workers changed, how child welfare investigation priorities shifted, and how the assessment and contact modalities were changed or adapted because of the pandemic. Using the conceptual framework of Lipsky's concept of street-level bureaucracy, the article presents a qualitative study of 10 Norwegian child protection workers and their transition to different modes of practice in the face of the pandemic. It also explores the new solutions used in child welfare assessment and service, along with the professional growth that occurred from adapting child welfare practice during a global pandemic.

Conclusion

The extensive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on social work – in both education and practice - is highlighted through the articles in both volumes of this special issue. The articles illustrate the importance of understanding the use of technology for social work and the consequences of the pandemic for clients, social workers and the practice. The pandemic has been a prolonged crisis. The studies conducted in the first wave offer social workers a first glimpse at how the profession adapted and used creativity to meet the needs of vulnerable clients. The articles also demonstrate how social workers could improve and expand service delivery during the pandemic. Some of the accommodations acquired through meeting the challenges of the pandemic may have a long-lasting impact on social service delivery. For example,

the use of technology may continue to offer both the social worker and client flexibility and ease in scheduling appointments.

COVID-19 had a tremendous impact on relationships, human contact, and a sense of community. Social workers and clients reported feeling isolated. In both volumes of the special edition, many of the articles highlighted social workers missing peer relationships with co-workers and supervisors. A theme that emerged in more than one study was a concern from social workers regarding isolation and the mental well-being of clients whom pre-pandemic had already faced isolation and disconnection from community.

COVID-19 resulted in multiple changes to social work practice and education, illustrating the flexibility and innovation of the profession. Yet, social work practice and education experienced many still unresolved ethical and practice-related challenges. As we move forward in a post-COVID-19 pandemic world, social work leaders and educators will have to consider how we build upon the positive changes in the profession, while addressing the multiple challenges we have experienced. We must prepare social workers for harnessing the power of technology in practice, while understanding and addressing the multiple ethical issues that may arise, and the impacts on social workers' family-, community-, and work-life balance. We must imagine new jobs in social work practice and new ways of engaging with individuals, families, communities and organizations. We must better understand the multiple roles of social workers in pandemic response, and prepare social workers for future pandemics and other global disasters, such as climate change. The COVID-19 pandemic is still impacting the world, and we will be working to understand the impacts of the pandemic on social work education and social work practices for many years to come.

References

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