

Chapter 2

Informatics in Social Services: Research, Developments, and Outcomes from the Finnish Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the chapter is to describe and analyse the conception of ICTs for social services on the basis of previous international and national research and a case study of Finnish experiences. The authors describe the concept of ICTs for social services and identify the main areas of interest and research findings in relation to the paradigm of social services informatics. The data for this part was collected by an integrated literature review of ICT research. Next, the authors review and evaluate the development phases of Finnish social services informatics. On the basis of national and international literature, they compare the similarities and distinguishing elements in the evolution of social care ICT in research and practice. On the basis of these findings on the main issues, challenges, opportunities, and trends, some recommendations for future research as well as for working practices are briefly described.

INTRODUCTION

The impact of new technology on public-sector service delivery has long been debated by different actors in the Western countries. In particular, political and managerial actors have often mentioned the ICT for public services as a tool for improving the efficiency and quality of services.

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The European Union has released policy programmes for ICT use since the 1990's (Growth, Competitiveness, Employment, The Challenge and Ways forward into The 21st Century, 1993), and still promotion of information society is one of the EU's key areas (see, e.g., <http://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/>). The massive research interest in ITC has mainly focused on creating strategies,

action plans and projects for health services (Hämäläinen et al., 2008; for Europe, see e.g. <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/life-and-work/ehealth-and-ageing>), and an influential actor in the field, the International Medical Informatics Association (IMIA, 2014) network has supported the knowledge creation. However, the focus of development has in some instances been on social services ICT (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2005; The Department of Health, 2003), and we consider it a great challenge to combine the social services and health care information domains in the future for the best of people in need of services.

Social services as well as ICT are problematic concepts when conceptualising the overview of ICTs for social services. The concepts social services, social care, social work or broader concepts, such as human services or welfare services, are partly connected to each other. For instance, when comparing different welfare models or regimes, comparative social policy research has used the concepts social services (Kautto, 2002), social care services (Anttonen & Sipilä, 1996) or welfare services (Jensen, 2008), covering partly the same and partly different services. This has affected the research results, and Jensen (2008), for instance, has stated that the production of different welfare services varies and these differences should be taken into account when comparing welfare models. According to this, we adopt social services as a broad concept for the starting point of our chapter. In this sense, these services can include help and services of different kinds for different citizen groups provided by public, private or voluntary organizations. The definition covers both services provided by the public administration and those purchased from business and the third sector.

Even though ICT issues have been extensively discussed, in connection with such areas as child welfare (e.g., Gillingham, 2011; Naccarato, 2010; Tregeagle & Darcy, 2008), mental health (Kapp & Stipp, 2010) and the aged (Blaschke et al., 2009), to name a few, there exist very few proper

definitions of what is actually included in social services ICT. The relation of social work and ICT has also been studied in several instances, such as from the viewpoint of social work education (Ahmedani et al., 2011; Burgess, 2004; Fitch, 2005; Youn, 2007), employee attitudes towards ICT (Barcy & Barcy, 2008; Carrilio, 2007), web-based counselling (Mishna et al., 2012; Murphy et al., 2009), online social work (LaMendola, 2010) or Internet advocacy (McNutt, 2000; Moon & DeWeaver, 2005), but even here the definition of ICT is quite labile. During the last few years, the focus of definitions has moved to social work informatics, even though some attempts to describe this area almost beyond reach have been made earlier: Grebel and Steyaert (1995) write about social informatics in the context of social work and education, and Garret (2005) describes the electronic turn in social work, meaning the influence of ICT on work practices, but also pointing out its possibly negative influence on clients' rights.

Parker-Demiris and Oliver have defined social work informatics as a combination of computer science, information science and social work, designed to assist in the management and processing of data, information, and knowledge to support social work practice (Parker-Oliver & Demiris, 2006). This definition looks for models in the definition of nursing informatics, which has the same main elements when defined from the viewpoint of the discipline. It includes computer science, information science and nursing science, and is designed to assist in the management and processing of nursing data, information and knowledge to support the practice and delivery of nursing (Graves & Corcoran 1989). When defined from the viewpoint of professional roles, the definitions highlight the speciality of profession (e.g., American Nurses Association, 2008), and when information technology is highlighted, the focus is on handling, modelling and communicating information through technology (Saba & McCormick, 2002). Naccarato (2010) and Ngyuen (2007) have developed the social work informatics

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