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SOCIAL WORK AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE: IMPLICATIONS FOR SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE AND EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper explored the evolving intersection between Artificial Intelligence (AI) and social work, focusing on the implications for practice and education in South Africa. As AI technologies increasingly shape human-centered services, their integration into social work offers both promising opportunities and critical challenges. The study adopted a literature review methodology to explore the global and local applications of AI in areas such as mental health, education, substance abuse intervention, and social services delivery. The analysis revealed that AI can enhance decision-making, personalize interventions, and expand access to marginalized populations. However, the paper also highlights barriers such as digital inequality, ethical concerns, resistance to change, and a lack of policy frameworks specific to AI in social work. Drawing from these insights, the study calls for inclusive policies, strategic investment in training and infrastructure, and community engagement to ensure the ethical and effective use of AI in social work. The paper concludes by proposing a conceptual framework that underscores human-AI collaboration, ethical considerations, accessibility, data empowerment, and cross-sector partnerships as key pillars for successfully integrating AI into South Africa's social work landscape.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, social work, Ethics, Technology, South Africa

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the intersection of social work and AI and makes inferences about its implications in South Africa. In the recent past, various studies projected that Information and communication technology (ICT) had a significant opportunity to transform and advance social work practice and drive a profound social change globally (Berzin, Singer & Chan, 2015; Grant, 2018; McAuliffe & Nipperess, 2017; Reamer, 2019). This is because integrating technology into social work and its related practices has led to flexible, personalized, and accessible services (Aktan, Turhan & Dolu, 2022; Attridge, 2020; Fulmer, 2019; Taylor, 2017). Technological advancement, especially in AI, has profound implications for social work practice and education in the current Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), with more incredible shifts anticipated in the future. Therefore, these technological revolutions call for a paradigm shift in the global design and implementation of social work services, interventions, and training and education. The adoption of advanced technology and AI in social work is driven by the need for real-time data supported decision making, accessibility and flexibility of services, effective monitoring, accurate resource allocation, and augmenting human resources (Asakura et al., 2020; Kajiita & Kang'ethe, 2025). The adoption of AI in social work is critical due to the increasing social problems across the globe that are putting pressure on limited human resources. In South Africa, however, social work sector has been slower to adopt AI-drive technologies compared to other sectors (Safodien, 2021). This sluggish adoption of AI is attributable to ethical and legal concerns, a traditional emphasis on face-to-face interactions, and inadequate training and infrastructure (Kajiita & Kang'ethe, 2025). However, research is showing progressive uptakes of AI in social work, especially in education and training, psychotherapy and counseling, case management and reporting, and monitoring and evaluation of interventional programs (Asakura, 2020; Kajiita & Kang'ethe, 2025; Safodien, 2021). Against this developmental trajectory, the application of AI has sparked contentious issues such as ethical use of tools, bias, personal privacy and data security, access and infrastructure support (Kundi et al., 2023; Min, 2023). Nonetheless, as a helping profession social work is uniquely positioned and ethically capable of spearheading inclusive technological advancements to bolster service delivery across all classes of clients. The shifts and advancements in technology is an opportunity to rethink the social work roles, practices, and education and training globally and South Africa in particular.

Generally, AI denotes computer systems or models designed to replicate tasks requiring human Intelligence (Fiske, Henningsen & Buyx, 2019; Gamble, 2020; Zhou, Zhao & Zhang, 2022). These tasks include, but are not limited to, language interpretation and generation, pattern recognition, problem-solving, and providing recommendations (Cassell, 2019; Gillingham, 2020; Lehtiniemi, 2024). This shows the considerable progress made with machine learning, which, according to the literature, has resulted in more flexible and efficient AI applications across various sectors (Perron et al., 2019; Robila & Robila, 2020; Victor et al., 2021). For instance, AI applications such as predictive analytics have been used in social work to support clinical decisions and interventions (Afzali et al., 2019; Ahn & Vassileva, 2016; Cariceo et al., 2018; Garg & Glick, 2018), and training for practitioners (Asakura et al., 2020; Goldkind, 2021; Rodriguez, 2024; Victor, Kubiak, Ange & Perron, 2023). These studies, among others, illustrate the current benefits of AI and the prospective efficiency and effectiveness in social work in the future.

However, while some countries leverage AI to their advantage, others, particularly in Africa and South Africa specifically, face significant challenges (Gwagwa, Kazim & Hilliard, 2022; Mannuru et al., 2023; Prieto-Gutierrez et al., 2023). These studies highlight that developing countries are missing

the immense potential of AI to foster development and address critical social, training, and economic issues. Gwagwa et al. (2022) reveal emerging concerns about the rules, opportunities, and risks associated with these technologies. For instance, African-based studies on the benefits of AI report mixed reactions on the potential and risks in the use of AI tools (Arakpogun, Elsahn, Olan & Elsahn, 2021; Gaffley, Adams & Shyllon, 2022; Gwagwa et al., 2022; Safodien, 2021). Nonetheless, South Africa is at a level where artificial Intelligence can benefit social work practice and enhance professional development and training (South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP), 2020; Safodien, 2021). The adoption and utilization of AI are becoming prominent in learning, teaching, and a support tool to adapt to the evolving training and workforce practices (Asakura et al., 2020; Dodds, Heslop & Meredith, 2018; Goldingay, Epstein & Taylor, 2018; Pelaez, Garcia, & Masso, 2018).

Irrefutably, Artificial intelligence technologies have demonstrated their value across multiple aspects of social work practice, such as addressing workforce shortages, enhancing resource allocation through improved strategic decision-making, and improving accessibility of services. This aligns with the global Sustainable Development Goal 9 (Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation) that focuses on advancing technology to support strategic decision-making, optimize resource allocation, and respond to worker shortages (United Nations, 2024). Therefore, through technology and AI tools, it becomes efficient in alleviating poverty, expanding humanitarian aid, promoting economic development, and improving global health and well-being (Hui, Reshef & Zhou, 2023; Kong, Li & Jin, 2023; Mannuru et al., 2023). These systems and tools improve the capacity to choose evidence-based interventions, reduce unsuitable client or patient services, enhance program fidelity, optimize effectiveness, and achieve better outcomes. While complementing the traditional approaches, AI tools play an increasingly significant role in understanding human behavior and improving social services. Nonetheless, there are concerns about the ethical implications (Kundi, El Morr, Gorman & Dua, 2023; Min, 2023), data privacy issues (Phillips, 2017; Terry & Gunter, 2018; Sinha & Larrison, 2021), and the fundamental nature of social work (Gough & Spencer, 2019), which traditionally involves empathetic and responsive interactions between individuals.

The study examined the current state of AI in South African social work, with an overview of best practices and policy suggestions. The findings have relevance in supporting strategies towards utilizing AI technologies to develop and improved social work services to contribute to better service delivery in South Africa. The review and analysis of literature were guided by the following research questions: (i) In what aspect(s) of social work is/are AI utilized globally as well as in South Africa? (ii) What are some upcoming concerns in adopting AI in social work? (iii) What are some implications of AI in South African social work?

AN OVERVIEW OF AI OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES IN SOCIAL WORK

Integrating technology into social service practices, especially within the social work field, is a rapidly growing topic, sparking significant discussions about its impact on core principles like justice, equity, inclusion, relationships, professionalization, and working conditions. Research on AI has demonstrated the inherent opportunities in various human-related services. For instance, studies have highlighted the application of AI in psychotherapy (Aktan et a., 2022; de Mello & de Souza, 2019; Fiske, Henningsen & Buyx, 2019; Humer et al., 2020; Ogueji et al., 2021), cognitive behavioral therapy (Attridge, 2020; Gamble, 2020; Zhou, Zhao & Zhang, 2022), and counseling

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(Fulmer, 2019; Muhammad, 2023). Notably, the advantages of AI interventions are the ease of discussing embarrassing experiences, availability and flexibility, and the ability to communicate remotely. This reduces the cost of travel, as well as possible stigmatization and labeling.

AI has become instrumental in training and building capacity in institutions of learning and service provisioning agencies (Vitcor et al., 2023). In social work education and training, research shows that AI has gained momentum, and developmental advocacy is ongoing globally (Asakura, et al., 2020; Dodds, Heslop & Meredith, 2018; Safodien, 2021; Tulğan & Güre, 2024; Wretman & Macy, 2016). AI applications such as ChatGPT are being used for writing reports and assessments with high success (Rodriguez et al., 2024). This facilitates and enhances the uptake of technology-based teaching and learning. According to Victor et al. (2023), ChatGPT proved the ability to competently answer social work-based exams at Bachelor, Master, and Clinical exams at 76%, 80%, and 64%, respectively. These findings suggest that generative AI has the potential to promote equality in access to education and training. Since AI will powerfully shape the nature of teaching and learning in the future, educators will have a crucial role in preparing social work students for practice in an AI-driven environment, and the broader curriculum must include the impact of AI on society. Therefore, social workers and AI developers must work collaboratively to regulate the use of AI tools in social work for practical applications and interventions.

Despite the global debates on AI and its benefits, some studies indicate a general need for more awareness or understanding of AI among social workers and a low level of acceptance, especially in African settings (Arakpogun et al., 2021; Safodien, 2021). However, social workers are keen to learn more about AI and the tools that could help them manage their heavy workloads and empower their clientele (Pelaez et al., 2018; Pink, Ferguson & Kelly, 2022). Notably, AI and its related technologies are not without challenges. Literature indicates critical concerns about AI, such as reduced personal contact with clients (Fiske et al., 2019) and fears of job displacement, and digital inequality (Qiua & Zhaob, 2019). The other pertinent issues are ethics (Grant, 2018; Gough & Spencer, 2019; Gwagwa et al., 2022; Gaffley et al., 2022), biases, and data privacy (Kundi et al., 2023; Min, 2023; Nazer et al. 2023). These issues, among others, are considered teething challenges of AI integration into social services and other human-related sectors, hence sparking debate on the safety and protection of clients' data. Nonetheless, the benefits supersede the challenges, hence the need to capture the opportunities for improved service delivery.

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A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR ENHANCED AI-SOCIAL WORK IN SOUTH AFRICA

This conceptual framework illustrates how AI can be leveraged to enhance social work practices while considering the ethical, practical, and social implications.

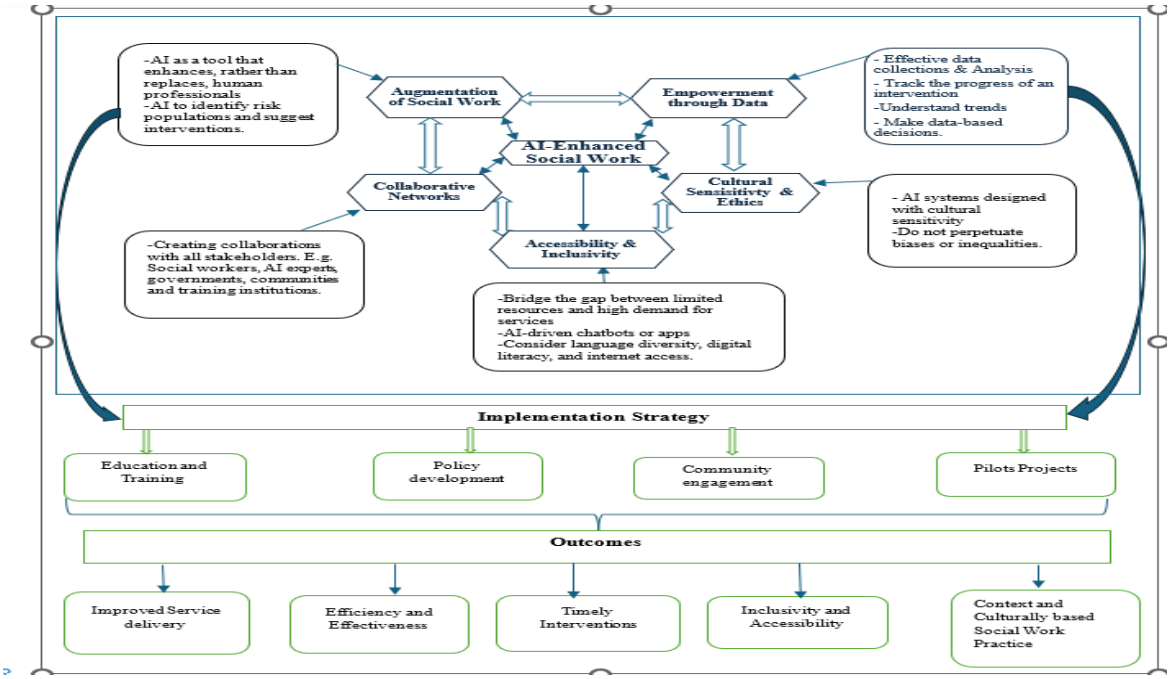


Figure 1. A Conceptual Framework of AI-enhanced Social Work. (Source: Authors' Construction)

This conceptual framework is premised on the idea that AI can significantly enhance social work in South Africa by improving efficiency and accessibility and addressing the needs of digital clients. Five key principles are considered fundamental to successfully integrating AI into social work practices. The first pillar focuses on AI as a tool for augmenting social work and should not replace human social work professionals. The technology should instead be used to assist in data analysis for more informed decisions. The second principle emphasizes the importance of considering culturally sensitive and ethical applications of AI. For instance, South Africa's diverse cultural landscape demands AI systems designed with cultural sensitivity and ethical considerations to avoid offending any racial or tribal segments of the population. This is critical to avoid perpetuating biases or inequalities associated with the development of AI (Barsky, 2017; James & Whelan, 2022). The third principle looks at accessibility and inclusivity. Adopting AI in society should enhance access and inclusiveness to service delivery, hence lessening the existing gaps. This is critical in addressing the gap between the limited resources, including human resources, and the high demand for social services. For instance, AI-driven chatbots and applications can be instrumental in providing services for individuals in rural and other unreachable areas and where the shortage of social workers is dire. However, the implementation must consider digital literacy and internet access factors. The fourth principle is empowerment through Data. AI can facilitate effective data collection and analysis, which is crucial for evidence-based social work interventions. By so doing, social workers can effectively track the progress of interventions, understand trends, and make data-driven decisions. Therefore, this improves monitoring and evaluation practices within social work practice. Finally, the fifth principle is being cognizant of the significance of collaborative networks. These networks are critical for

funding, training, and designing relevant, effective, and culturally aligned technologies. Since social workers are not experts in AI programming and other complex computer-related areas, collaboration with AI experts, government agencies, and community stakeholders is essential for the successful integration of AI in social work practices in South Africa.

The above framework also proposes some strategies for the implementation of AI. These strategies include education and training, where programs for social workers' use of AI tools, technically and ethically, must continually be undertaken. Since there is a policy lacuna in implementing AI in social work, social workers should advocate for policies that support the use of AI in social work and ensure these technologies are regulated to prevent misuse and protect vulnerable populations. Community engagements and collaborations with local communities are fundamental to the success of adopting AI in social work to promote inclusiveness. Community engagements are critical because they inform the AI experts to design tools tailored to the specific needs and values of the people in their social-cultural settings. This strategy would then be linked with pilot project strategies to test and streamline the technologies with the available support resources and people's needs for broader implementation. Reflectively, this framework postulates that a successful integration of AI and related technologies must deliberately adopt a balanced approach between humans and AI tools. AI tools, where applicable, augment human capabilities but do not replace them. This would address the mythical 'human-machine conflict.

METHOD

This paper focused on integrating AI tools and technologies in social work practices across the globe and drawing implications for South Africa. To achieve this objective, a literature review methodology was adopted to scan through relevant studies and synthesize themes focusing on AI and social services, policies, AI ethics, and training and education. Unlike systematic reviews, which concentrate on specific research questions and strict protocols (Tricco et al.,2018), this paper adopted traditional review a broader approach of searching the available evidence and analyzing relevant data (Peters et al., 2015), to generate themes to answer the research questions. This is critical in identifying current practices, knowledge, and gaps in AI and social work literature in South Africa (Thomas et al., 2019).

SEARCH AND INCLUSION STRATEGY

The search for previous research was conducted through three databases, which are Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar. These databases were selected because they were accessible, and the records would be easily retrieved. The inclusion and exclusion criteria were as follows: studies less than fifteen years old, published in English, from within and without South Africa, qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods, peer-reviewed articles, focusing on AI and social services, and AI and social work education. The studies that did not meet these criteria were not included in the review. A combination of terms such as "AI and Social work in South Africa", "AI and social services", "IA and Social work practice", "AI and social work education", and "ethics and AI", were used to search for the studies. The search yielded numerous studies, which after being subjected to the inclusion criteria yielded 48 studies and one policy document, constituting a sample of 49 records. Relevant studies were identified by reading their titles and abstracts and subsequent in-depth review of the findings and conclusions to ascertain their suitability.

DATA EXTRACTION AND ANALYSIS

The researchers focused on reading and summarizing the findings, conclusions and recommendations of the selected studies. Adopting the content analysis technique the researchers were able to construct themes emanating from the summaries, and in line with the research questions. The findings are presented thematically and discussed in detail, in relation to previous studies.

RESULTS

HUMAN-AI COLLABORATION IN SOCIAL SERVICES DELIVERY

The analysis revealed that AI is increasingly used to augment human capabilities to improve efficiency and productivity in human-centered services (Kong, Li & Jin, 2023; Hui, Reshef & Zhou, 2023). In health, finance, and education sectors, professionals are supported by AI in decision-making, analysis, and information processing, leading to efficient and better outcomes (Hodgson et al., 2022; Qiua & Zhaob, 2019). Such augmentation requires workers to learn and become accustomed to new technologies, adapt to cooperating with AI systems, and tap into unique human capabilities, such as creativity, critical thinking, and empathy.

In essence, digital literacy and competencies are indispensable in using AI effectively. This is because entities and people with greater levels of digital literacy and technical competence are more likely to become familiar with, adopt, and deploy effectively suitable AI tools (Booyse & Scheepers, 2023; Diaconu et al., 2020; Hodgson et al., 2022). Contrary, marginalized groups, e.g., low-income populations, people with poor educational training, and the elderly, may struggle with acquiring competencies to effectively use AI technologies, further widening the digital gap (Arakpogun et al., 2021; Booyse & Scheepers, 2023). Importantly, for these reasons, Rodriguez et al. (2024) identify that social workers require knowledge, competencies, and familiarity with applying Generative AI tools effectively and responsibly. Consequently, social work educators should collaborate to develop and incorporate AI materials into curricula to institutionalize these upcoming needs.

ADOPTION OF AI IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION AND TRAINING

The available literature proved that there has been a positive acceptance of technology in general and AI in specific by social work education and training in developing and developed countries (Asakura et al., 2020; Dodds et al., 2018; Rodriguez et al., 2024; Safodien, 2021; Tulğan & Güre, 2024). Additionally, in practice, other studies have also documented the use of AI to formulate and apply e-social work practice (Goldingay et al., 2018; Pelaez et al., 2018; Phillips, 2017; Pink, Ferguson & Kelly, 2022). The studies illustrate that the use of AI in social work training is transforming how future social workers are educated and deployed during various interventions.

The analysis of literature on AI and education shows that AI tools have the potential to improve learning by providing personalized learning experiences, such as adaptive learning platforms that adapt to individual students' needs and virtual learning environments that give students real-life, interactive experiences in practicing social interventions (Asakura et al., 2020; Barret et al., 2019; Victor et al., 2023). Importantly, AI is helpful to students and instructors in tracking students' progress

and recognizing at-risk students, thus enhancing curriculum effectiveness and throughput (Hodgson et al., 2022). For example, AI-based chatbots like ChatGPT provide real-time assistance and information to students, making learning accessible and thrilling. However, South Africa needs to expedite the adoption of technology advancement to incorporate AI into social work education (Safodien, 2021). This study thus encourages higher learning and training institutions to invest in and include AI in social work training and, by extension, practice.

AI AND SUPPORT IN COGNITIVE AND MENTAL HEALTH INTERVENTIONS

The current research on AI and mental health shows that AI tools grant space for diverse therapeutical and cognitive behavioral interventions. In line with this, there is an increased application of AI in psychotherapy (Aktan et al., 2022; de Mello et al., 2019; Horn & Weisz, 2020; Humer et al., 2020), mental health therapy (Bakker et al., 2016; Gamble, 2020; Garg & Glick, 2018; Ogueji et al., 2021), counseling (Fulmer, 2019; Muhammad, 2023), and other related psychological interventions (Fiske et al., 2019; Zhou et al., 2022). These studies illustrate how AI is converging with psychotherapy by delivering novel tools and approaches to mental health care. These tools range from chatbots with basic mental health support to sophisticated systems that guide therapists in diagnosing and treating clients (Garg & Glick, 2018). For example, Chatbots such as Woebot and Wysa utilize natural language processing (NLP) to converse with users, delivering techniques from cognitively based behavioral therapy (CBT) and other therapeutic interventions (Asakura et al., 2020; Mannuru et al., 2023). The criticality of these tools is that they are easily accessible, delivering instantaneous support to people with no access to therapy.

Moreover, AI has become instrumental in diagnosing mental health conditions by analyzing patients' patterns in speech, text, and behavior (Garg & Glick, 2018; Zhou et al., 2022). This is possible through analytic and predictive algorithms, which can detect signs of depression or anxiety from social media activity, hence informing social service providers of early interventions. Although mental and psychotherapy services are more associated with psychologists and psychiatrists, social workers are key players in various stages of diagnosis, treatment, and support. Hence, these AI tools are considered applicable in social work practice.

AI IN THE FIGHT AGAINST SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND CHILD MALTREATMENT

The literature analysis revealed that AI is yielding positive results in the battle against crime and abuse of drugs and substances. Some studies have reported novel approaches to prevention, healing, and recovery services for drug abuse patients (Ahn & Vassileva, 2016; Perron et al., 2019). In addition, studies indicate that AI enhances the role played by social service providers in detecting threats to children's welfare (Gillingham, 2016; Gillingham, 2020; Robila & Robila, 2020; Victor et al., 2021). For instance, real-time monitors consisting of wearables and smartphones that track people's signs of withdrawal or relapse are excellent examples. These devices can provide healthcare providers or other support systems with timely data to inform specific interventions.

Significantly, research documents that chatbots powered by AI have the capabilities to provide 24/7 support, coping measures, and refer users to resources (Fiske et al., 2019). Research suggests that as technologies such as AI advance, there are greater opportunities to address the impact of drug abuse in society. However, this requires strategic partnerships among technologists,

healthcare professionals, policymakers, and communities to maximize the opportunities AI provides, but safeguarding the dignity and welfare of vulnerable clients.

AI IN MONITORING AND EVALUATION OF SOCIAL SERVICES DELIVERY AND INTERVENTIONS

The literature analysis showed that AI predictive analytics are instrumental in monitoring and evaluating interventional programs implemented by various social service providers such as in child abuse (Perron et al., 2019), substance addiction (Ahn & Vassileva, 2016; Perron et al., 2019), and youth recidivism (Ting et al., 2019). With data-driven information, social services providers such as social workers can act timely and provide effective tailor-made interventions. These predictive tools are essential for child welfare agencies and rehabilitation centers to monitor and analyze the behavior of clients (James & Whelan, 2022). This is because AI can analyze the data, hence easing and bolstering tracking and enhancing administrative efficiency.

In addition, AI plays a vital role in case management and report preparation (Sinha & Larrison, 2021; Victor et al., 2021). This is attainable through Virtual Assistants and Chatbots offering support and resources to clients (Fiske et al., 2019). In this context, AI aims to bridge the limitations on staff shortage to provide key services continuously. Besides, it decreases the workload and burnout on service delivery among social workers (Tambe & Rice, 2018). Hence, utilization of AI has the potential to enhance program design and planning as well as the execution of social programs and provide information on policy to support strengthening interventions and resource distribution. This means that AI tools play a key role in implementing social services by government ministries, non-governmental organizations, and welfare organizations such as rehabilitation centers and child welfare. This is because AI tools enable one to easily and reliably measure the outcomes of multiple social interventions (Gillingham, 2016).

ETHICAL NUANCES OF AI IN SOCIAL WORK

The analysis of literature on AI ethics revealed contentious issues in implementation of AI in social services sectors such as social work. The findings indicate the common ethical dilemmas across studies are personal privacy, data protection, and security (Abulibdeh, Zaidan, & Abulibdeh, 2024; Byrne, Kirwan & Mc Guckin, 2019; Gaffley, Adams & Shyllon, 2022; Gough & Spencer, 2019; Green, 2018; McAuliffe & Nipperess, 2017). Moreover, algorithms' potential bias can mislead decision-making in some contexts (Kundi et al., 2023; Min, 2023; Nazer et al., 2023), hence raising concerns about the interventions made on human beings.

In addition to ethical issues, other studies have revealed that resistance attitudes from conservative social services providers, such as social workers (Aktan et al., 2022), are critical in implementing AI-driven interventions. This challenge is more apparent in developing countries compared to developed countries (Gwagwa, Kazim & Hilliard, 2022), perhaps due to lack of or inadequate AI skills and cultural dimensions.

GARING LACUNAE IN POLICY AND REGULATORY FRAMEWORK FOR AI IN SOUTH AFRICA

The literature search yielded only one document regarding the use of technology in South African social work milieu needs (South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP), 2020). However, this document provides guidelines, and it is not a comprehensive legal framework.

Therefore, there is urgent need for a designated policy framework for applying AI tools and technologies in training and education, and design and delivery social services. With these policy gaps, the uptake of AI in social work could be delayed or stifled, hence missing out on the possible benefits for practitioners and beneficiaries. Therefore, this study calls for the apt formulation of AI policy on social work in South Africa and consequently inform on curriculum development in higher learning and training institutions. The policy framework should spell out the best practices for incorporating AI into social work and its impact in South Africa society. This is critical since research evidences the positive transformation of higher education through AI (Barret et al., 2019; Bates, Cobo, Mari~no & Wheeler, 2020).

DISCUSSION

The literature on AI highlights the complex interplay between technology and humans and how service delivery is transforming. Research suggests a positive trajectory of acceptability and adoption of AI in areas such as labor markets, education, healthcare (mental health, psychotherapy, counseling, etc.), and social services (Bates et al., 2020; Hodgson et al., 2022; Gamble, 2020; Horn & Weisz, 2020; Muhammad, 2023). The literature analysis revealed that AI is a collaborative tool to enhance human performance in various aspects of their practice. AI presents multiple opportunities to address inaccessibility and inequality in social work service delivery, hence promoting inclusivity. By adopting AI innovations in sectors such as healthcare and education, it reduces disparities in access, especially for communities that are hard to reach. Nevertheless, disparities in AI accessibility and adoption may reinforce disparities and deepen inequalities based on socioeconomic status, geographical position, computer literacy, and institutional obstacles (Gwagwa et al., 2022). For instance, amid South Africa's poverty and unavailability of stable internet connections and power supply, particularly in rural areas, having AI-based services is an optimistic fantasy. This is perhaps the reason that technology-based social services and interventions' adoption and uptake are slow in the country (Safodien, 2021).

Ethical concerns and biases in AI are particularly significant in theory and practice (Gwagwa et al., 2022; Gaffley et al., 2022; James & Whelan, 2022), especially in social work and other social therapeutic services. The contentious issues emanate from new approaches of using machines and technology juxtaposed to conventional human-human interactions. Arguably, the loss or diminishing relationship utilities, such as empathy and sympathy accrued during person-to-person interactions, become an opportunity cost for adopting AI tools. For instance, according to Gamble (2020), the increasing demand for mental healthcare and technological advancements suggest that MHapps and chatbots will continue to advance. However, while AI chatbots can offer users a platform to access tools, discuss their issues, monitor their moods, and improve mental health literacy, they should not be seen as substitutes for therapists or mental health professionals.

Policy-wise, the study established a necessity for clear policies regarding AI integration in South African social services. Therefore, to promote positive impact through AI technologies, there is need to regulate AI applications to avoid unscrupulous use and over-reliance on AI as an alternative to human services providers. This is because, as established in literature (Kundi et al., 2023; Min, 2023; Nazer et al., 2023), algorithm bias, bias in data, feedback loops, transparency, fairness, privacy, and ethical decision-making may be violated, thus warranting recourse. There is a necessity for clear policies and proper implementation to avoid discrimination and ensure fairness by AI systems. To empower the grassroots communities in AI adoption and absorption,

there is need to for South Africa to develop legal frameworks to enhance awareness, innovation, access and implementation in various segments of the social services sector.

Moreover, analysis indicates the need for education and skill development in AI technologies to bridge the digital divide. This implies that social workers who apply technology successfully and ethically must undertake lifelong learning and engage in public policy and community engagement to transform AI-driven service delivery positively.

Having defined areas in which AI and social work converge as well as the ethical complexities involved with it, it is critical to make inferences drawn out from the South African context. In the first instance, these findings suggest that policy interventions and measures will spur AI adoption in social work. To bridge disparities in accessing and adopting AI, forward-looking policy interventions and measures aimed at enhancing equity, diversity, and accessibility in terms of technology are critical. These measures may narrow down the digital gap by providing subsidies for training and education in AI, enhancing internet infrastructure, as well as promoting diversity in research and development in AI.

Additionally, as social services have traditionally been human-to-human, community outreach must take priority for ethical and context-specific AI interventions. Interaction with local communities and local organizations is critical to comprehend and cope with marginalized groups' barriers to accessing technological-based services. Community-informed plans and outreach to underserved communities play a critical role in empowering people with competencies and information required to excel in an AI-based service provision.

Notably, professional development and training are a beacon for the advancement and sustainability of IA in social service delivery. It is crucial that social workers continually get skilled and reskilled to keep up with technological advancements and shifts in the Fourth Industrial Revolution. The institutions of higher learning, government ministries, and agencies must strategically invest in AI training and development and create awareness about available programs for an impactful AI service delivery. Therefore, social workers must utilize technology to enhance their practices and oversee that technology is developed and implemented to promote social good.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND PRACTICE IN SOCIAL WORK

The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into social work presents significant implications for theoretical development and professional practice, especially within the South African context. As the dynamics of the Fourth Industrial Revolution affects every sector, social work theory and practice must evolve to accommodate the opportunities and challenges posed by emerging technologies. Therefore, the implications of this study to theory includes reframing the traditional social work concepts. The integration of AI into social work introduces the need to rethink the core social work theoretical constructs such as human agency, empowerment, and relationship dynamics, which emphasize human judgement and empathy in the helping process. Integrating AI within this traditional theoretical lens could be problematic since AI cannot replicate all these elements. Consequently, the existing theories should be expanded to incorporate AI as complementary tools to support the helping process, rather than replacing the human agency. Notably, due to the ethical issues emanating from the use of AI in social services, there is need for

ethical frameworks, which are globally aligned and contextually grounded considering the social, cultural and economic dynamics of communities.

On practice, the findings highlight the need for technology competency curriculum development and capacity building. The institutions of higher education should incorporate AI and digital skills into social work curricula, and by extension to provide continuous profession development to remain effective and contribute to the enhancement of AI advancements. Importantly, the findings have critical implications for AI policy and regulatory development to enable ethical and inclusive use of AI in social work. Other implication includes strategic collaborations and interdisciplinary practice to leverage on the professional skills, expertise, and experiences to advance the positive impact of AI in social services sectors. For example, computer scientists, technologists, and data scientists collaborating with social workers to develop computer applications to minoring children at risk of domestic violence, drug abuse or dropping from school. The corroborations and interdisciplinary approaches can lead to development of AI tools that are human-centred, culturally aligned, and context relevant. This will not only increase the positive impact in social service sectors but accelerate the acceptability of AI in local communities.

CONCLUSION

This paper highlights a critical juncture in social work profession and training evolution. It demonstrates an imminent paradigm shift in both theory and practice where adoption of advanced technology such as AI could accelerate achieving equitable, efficient, and ethical service delivery in South Africa. This paper has explored the intersection of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and social work within the South African context, highlighting both the opportunities and the challenges that this technological evolution presents. Evidence from global and local studies illustrates that AI holds significant promise for transforming social work by enhancing service delivery, improving decision-making, and expanding access to underserved populations. From mental health support and educational tools to predictive analytics in child protection and substance abuse interventions, AI technologies are poised to complement and strengthen traditional social work practices. However, the successful integration of AI in South African social work is contingent upon addressing several critical barriers. These include digital literacy gaps, infrastructural limitations, ethical concerns, and the absence of a comprehensive policy framework tailored to AI in social work. Without clear guidelines and strategic investment in training and infrastructure, the country risks exacerbating existing inequalities and missing out on the benefits that AI can bring to social services. To fully realize the potential of AI, this study emphasizes the need for multi-stakeholder collaboration involving policymakers, educators, technologists, and community organizations. There must be deliberate efforts to design inclusive policies, equip social workers with relevant skills, and ensure that AI applications align with ethical standards and cultural contexts. Moreover, embedding AI literacy in social work curricula is imperative to prepare future professionals for practice in an increasingly digital world. In essence, AI should be seen not as a replacement for human judgment and empathy but as a tool to augment the social work profession. Its responsible and thoughtful application can lead to more resilient, responsive, and equitable social service systems in South Africa and beyond.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict-of-interest in publishing this paper.

CONTRIBUTION OF AUTHORS

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