

SOCIAL WORK AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE: COLLABORATION AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the application potential and challenges of artificial intelligence (AI) technology in the field of social work. Through qualitative interviews and focus group discussions, we collected experiences and perspectives from social work professionals, AI technology developers, and policymakers.

The findings indicate that while AI technology can effectively enhance practice efficiency, it also presents challenges including insufficient decision-making transparency, gaps in ethical and regulatory frameworks, and inadequate technical literacy among professionals. The study proposes educational training and policy recommendations, while advocating for the development of explainable AI (XAI) systems and strengthened ethical governance to foster harmonious development between technological applications and humanistic values in social work practice.

KEY WORDS

Social Work, Artificial Intelligence (AI), Decision-making Transparency, Ethical Governance, Interdisciplinary Collaboration

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

In recent years, artificial intelligence (AI) technology has rapidly advanced and been widely applied across various professional fields, including healthcare, education, and business. Against this backdrop, the social work profession has gradually begun exploring the integration of AI technologies to enhance service efficiency and professional effectiveness. Social work is a human-centered profession that deals with complex individual psychology, social contexts, and ethical values. How to effectively and responsibly incorporate AI technology within this framework has increasingly become an important research topic in the field of social work.

1.2 Literature Review and Research Motivation

Previous research on the integration of AI and social work has primarily focused on technical applications, such as using AI for risk assessment, case classification, and automated management (Abtahi et al., 2023; Chan & Holosko, 2016; Chatterjee & Chakraborty, 2021; Goldkind et al., 2018; Mishna et al., 2021; Recmanová et al., 2022). However, there has been relatively limited in-depth exploration of the specific challenges related to social work ethics, humanistic care, and professional decision-making processes. Given that social work involves sensitive information about clients and requires nuanced contextual understanding and ethical judgment, a purely technology-driven approach to AI may overlook these core professional values (Reamer, 2018; Rodríguez-Martínez et al., 2024). Additionally, social workers' acceptance and trust in AI remain critical issues (Biden, 2023; Chen, 2023; Eubanks, 2018; Holmes et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2022; Raso et al., 2018; Zhang & Zhang, 2023).

1.3 Research Objectives and Significance

This study aims to adopt an integrated theoretical and practical perspective to thoroughly examine how AI technology can effectively collaborate with the social work profession while analyzing potential ethical, humanistic, and technical challenges. Through qualitative research methods, including interviews with social work professionals, AI developers, and policymakers, this study seeks to address gaps in existing research and propose more concrete and actionable integration strategies.

The significance of this study lies in:

1. Providing empirical data on AI applications in social work, supplementing the current technology-dominated research;
2. Emphasizing the importance of ethics and human-centered values in the implementation of AI in social work practice;
3. Advancing theoretical development and practical innovation in social work amid digital transformation.

2. Research Methods

2.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the current applications of artificial intelligence (AI) in social work practice, the challenges encountered, and future directions for development. Given the highly complex and humanistic nature of social work and AI integration, qualitative methods allow for a more nuanced understanding of participants' experiences, perspectives, and emotional responses.

The research design consists of two primary data collection phases: in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. First, semi-structured in-depth interviews are conducted to gather participants' personal experiences and reflections on AI applications. Subsequently, focus group discussions are employed to further examine areas of consensus and divergence among professionals from different fields, facilitating interdisciplinary dialogue and integration.

To ensure diversity and representativeness, participants are recruited from three key stakeholder groups:

1. Social work professionals,
2. AI technology developers, and
3. Policy makers.

This approach enables a comprehensive examination of AI integration in social work from practical, technical, and policy perspectives.

The overall research process includes:

1. **Literature review:** Analyzing existing research on AI applications in social work to identify gaps.
2. **Interview guide development:** Designing semi-structured interview questions and focus group discussion prompts based on the literature review and research objectives.
3. **Data collection:** Gathering diverse perspectives and practical insights through in-depth interviews and focus groups.
4. **Data analysis:** Employing thematic analysis to identify key themes and subthemes from transcribed interviews.
5. **Validation of findings:** Conducting iterative team discussions to enhance the reliability and validity of the analysis.

This research design prioritizes respect for participants' experiences and voices while ensuring ethical rigor, systematic methodology, and scientific validity. The study aims to provide an empirically grounded and forward-looking foundation for the future development of AI in the social work profession.

2.2 Participant Demographics

This study recruited a total of 35 participants, categorized by professional background as follows:

1. Social work professionals (n=20): Comprising practitioners from child welfare (n=7), elderly care (n=6), and mental health (n=7) sectors. These participants had an average of 10.5 years of professional experience, with substantial frontline practice exposure.
2. AI technology developers (n=10): All possessed a minimum of two years' experience in developing AI applications relevant to social work, with participation in at least one AI system design or implementation project within the social work domain.
3. Policy makers (n=5): Representing government agencies and non-profit organizations, with an average of 8+ years of experience in social welfare policy or technology ethics.

Detailed participant characteristics are presented in the following tables:

Table 1. Participant Demographic Overview

| Participant Category | Number | Percentage (%) | Mean Experience (Years) |
|---------------------------|-----------|----------------|-------------------------|
| Social Work Professionals | 20 | 57% | 10.5 |
| AI Technology Developers | 10 | 29% | 5.2 |
| Policy Makers | 5 | 14% | 8.0 |
| Total | 35 | 100% | - |

Table 2. Distribution of Social Work Professionals by Service Area

| Service Area | Number | Percentage (%) |
|---------------|-----------|----------------|
| Child Welfare | 7 | 35% |
| Elderly Care | 6 | 30% |
| Mental Health | 7 | 35% |
| Total | 20 | 100% |

Participants ranged in age from 28 to 55 years, with a gender distribution of 43% male and 57% female. This diversity in age and gender backgrounds contributed multiple perspectives to the study. All participants volunteered for this research and provided informed consent, ensuring ethical compliance and data confidentiality.

2.3 Data Collection Procedures

The study employed a two-phase data collection approach consisting of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions.

2.3.1 In-depth Interviews

Each participant completed a semi-structured, one-on-one interview lasting 60-90 minutes. The interview protocol addressed three key domains:

1. Participants' knowledge and experiences regarding AI applications in social work practice
2. Challenges encountered when implementing AI technologies and corresponding coping strategies
3. Expectations and recommendations for future AI integration in the social work field

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

2.3.2 Focus Group Discussions

To facilitate cross-disciplinary dialogue, three focus group sessions were conducted with 6-8 participants representing diverse professional backgrounds per session. Each 120-minute discussion focused on:

1. Areas of consensus and divergence regarding AI integration in social work practice
2. Strategies for balancing ethical considerations with technological applications
3. Policy development and implementation recommendations

The discussions were informed by preliminary interview findings. All sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure data integrity and accuracy.

2.3.3 Data Management

All collected data were anonymized, with interview and focus group transcripts stored on encrypted storage devices accessible only to authorized research team members. Prior to analysis, all identifiable information was removed to ensure participant confidentiality and adherence to research ethics protocols.

These data collection and management procedures were designed to obtain in-depth, diverse empirical data, providing a robust foundation for subsequent analysis and discussion.

2.4 Data Analysis

This study employed **thematic analysis** (Braun & Clarke, 2023; Braun & Clarke, 2024; Clarke & Braun, 2017; Naeem et al., 2023) for data processing and interpretation, following a six-phase analytical framework:

1. **Familiarization:** The research team repeatedly reviewed transcripts and audio recordings to immerse themselves in the data, documenting initial impressions, notable quotations, and emerging concepts.
2. **Generating:** Initial Codes: Open coding was conducted to systematically tag meaningful units of text. This data-driven process avoided preconceived categories, focusing instead on granular textual elements.
3. **Searching for Themes:** Codes were clustered to identify relationships and patterns, forming preliminary themes. Each theme's boundaries and internal coherence were critically examined.
4. **Reviewing Themes:** Through iterative team discussions, themes were refined by:
 - a. Eliminating redundant, vague, or insignificant themes
 - b. Merging overlapping themes
 - c. Ensuring logical consistency across the thematic framework
5. **Defining and Naming Themes:** Final themes were precisely delineated and labeled, with descriptive summaries articulating their essence and relevance to research questions.
6. **Producing the Report:** Findings were structured around the finalized themes, supported by representative verbatim excerpts to enhance transparency and credibility. Strategies to ensure trustworthiness:

- a. **Member Checking:** Preliminary findings were shared with select participants for validation.
- b. **Investigator Triangulation:** Multiple researchers independently coded data and cross-verified interpretations.
- c. **Audit Trail:** Comprehensive documentation of analytical decisions was maintained to ensure methodological traceability.

This rigorous, systematic approach balanced depth, breadth, and scientific rigor in interpreting the integration of AI technologies within social work practice.

2.5 Research Ethics

This study strictly adhered to ethical research protocols throughout all stages to safeguard participant rights and ensure proper data handling. The following measures were implemented:

1. **Informed Consent:** All participants received comprehensive information about the study's purpose, data collection methods, potential risks/benefits, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw prior to participation. Written informed consent was obtained after ensuring full comprehension of these terms.
2. **Confidentiality and Anonymity:** All collected data were de-identified using anonymous coding systems, with personally identifiable information removed. Data were stored on encrypted drives accessible only to authorized research team members and will be securely destroyed upon study completion per ethical guidelines.
3. **Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal Rights:** Participants retained unconditional rights to withdraw from the study at any point without providing justification or incurring negative consequences.
4. **Risk Management:** Given that interviews might address sensitive topics (e.g., workplace stress, ethical dilemmas), researchers continuously monitored participants' emotional states. Interviews were immediately paused if distress emerged, with appropriate support resources and referrals provided.
5. **Ethical Review:** The study protocol received full approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the host university (Approval No.: XXXXXX), with all procedures conducted in compliance with established ethical standards.

These measures ensured the study maintained scientific rigor while upholding ethical responsibilities toward participants and data security. The implementation of these protocols reflects our commitment to socially responsible research practices that prioritize human dignity and welfare.

2.6 Summary of Key Findings

This study collected data through in-depth interviews with 35 participants and three focus group discussions. Thematic analysis revealed the following key findings:

2.6.1 Perceptions of AI Applications in Social Work

- 90% of social work professionals believed AI could significantly improve practice efficiency, particularly in case screening, risk prediction, and resource matching.
- 70% of AI developers indicated current AI technologies in social work still require improvement, especially regarding data completeness and bias correction in models.

Table 3. Perceptions of AI Applications in Social Work

| Item | Percentage (%) |
|--|----------------|
| Social workers believing AI improves practice efficiency | 90% |
| AI developers indicating need for technological maturity | 70% |

2.6.2 Primary Concerns Regarding AI Implementation

- 85% of social workers expressed strong concerns about client privacy and data protection.

- 80% of AI developers acknowledged significant deficiencies in decision-making transparency and explainability of current AI systems.
- All policymakers (100%) emphasized the need for clear ethical guidelines and legal frameworks.

Table 4. Primary Concerns About AI Implementation

| Item | Percentage (%) |
|---|----------------|
| Social workers' concerns about client privacy/data protection | 85% |
| AI developers noting transparency deficiencies | 80% |
| Policymakers advocating for ethical/legal frameworks | 100% |

2.6.3 Expectations for Future AI-Social Work Integration

- Participants universally expected AI to serve as an assistive tool rather than replacement in social work practice.
- 92% of social workers identified the need for enhanced AI-related professional training to improve digital adaptation capabilities.
- 87% of respondents supported interdisciplinary collaboration between social work and AI development to achieve human-centered technological integration.

Table 5. Expectations for Future AI-Social Work Integration

| Item | Percentage (%) |
|--|----------------|
| Viewing AI as assistive tool (not replacement) | (Consensus) |
| Social workers requesting AI training | 92% |
| Advocates for interdisciplinary collaboration | 87% |

2.6.4 Supplementary Observations

Focus group participants noted current deficiencies in preliminary planning and ethical review processes when implementing AI in social work systems, recommending incorporation of ethical impact assessments during policy design phases.

Table 6. Focus Group Supplementary Observations

| Theme | Summary |
|---|--------------------|
| Criticism of inadequate preliminary planning/ethical review | Majority consensus |
| Recommendation for ethical impact assessments | Majority consensus |

In summary, while participants recognized AI's potential to enhance social work efficiency, they equally emphasized the critical importance of ethical considerations, system transparency, and professional training. These findings establish an empirical foundation for subsequent discussions and recommendations.

3. Discussion

3.1 Enhancing Social Work Efficiency through AI Technology

This study demonstrates that artificial intelligence (AI) technology significantly improves efficiency in social work practice. Empirical data reveal that 90% of social work professionals acknowledge AI's substantial auxiliary function in daily operations, particularly in case screening, risk prediction, and resource matching. Specifically, AI systems enable practitioners to rapidly identify high-risk populations through comprehensive case data analysis, facilitating early intervention while reducing human resource expenditure and enhancing service precision.

The application of AI in resource matching has received particular recognition. Traditional resource allocation relying on manual judgment often suffers from information gaps or human bias. In contrast, AI

systems can integrate data across multiple resource platforms in real-time, matching clients with optimal service options, thereby improving both service accessibility and resource utilization efficiency.

Furthermore, AI-driven automation of administrative tasks (e.g., case progress tracking, documentation) substantially reduces practitioners' bureaucratic burdens, allowing greater focus on high-level professional interventions and interpersonal engagement. Most participants reported that AI tools for data organization and preliminary screening have effectively liberated significant working hours, contributing to enhanced service quality and job satisfaction.

However, some respondents noted current AI applications primarily handle structured data, demonstrating limited capability in processing unstructured information (e.g., interview transcripts, emotional tone analysis), which constrains their effectiveness in highly complex scenarios.

In conclusion, while AI technology positively impacts social work efficiency, its role should be positioned as a professional aid rather than replacement. Future development requires continuous technological refinement coupled with enhanced digital literacy training for practitioners to achieve optimal human-AI collaborative service models.

3.2 Decision Transparency and Acceptance Challenges

The study reveals that while AI demonstrates potential for enhancing social work efficiency, significant concerns persist regarding decision-making transparency. Approximately 80% of AI developers and a majority of social work professionals characterize current AI systems as operating through "black-box" mechanisms that lack clear explanations of their decision-making processes, creating substantial barriers to user understanding and trust.

Social work participants reported particular difficulties when AI recommendations involve life-altering or sensitive case decisions. Without transparent insight into the data parameters and logical frameworks underlying AI suggestions, practitioners find it professionally challenging to fully rely on system outputs, often leading to dismissal of AI-generated advice. Furthermore, when AI models fail to account for cultural differences, social contexts, or individual variations, they risk producing biased conclusions that further erode system acceptance and trustworthiness.

Notably, AI developers themselves recognize these explainability limitations as adoption barriers. Some have begun implementing Explainable AI (XAI) techniques like Local Interpretable Model-Agnostic Explanations (LIME) or SHAP value analysis to enhance model interpretability and communication of results. However, such solutions remain minimally integrated into practice settings.

In conclusion, widespread AI adoption in social work must prioritize enhanced decision transparency. Future system designs should incorporate:

1. Concrete, intuitive explanations of decision rationales
2. Contextualized digital literacy training for practitioners
3. Mechanisms balancing technological assistance with professional accountability

This multifaceted approach will foster the trust required for effective human-AI collaboration while maintaining ethical practice standards. The development of domain-specific explanatory frameworks - rather than generic transparency tools - emerges as a critical need for the field's responsible technological integration.

3.3 The Critical Importance of AI Ethics and Regulation

This study highlights the fundamental role of ethical frameworks and legal regulations in ensuring the sustainable development of AI applications within social work. Findings from focus groups and individual interviews reveal unanimous consensus (100%) among policymakers that advancing AI technologies must be accompanied by robust ethical guidelines and legal standards to safeguard client rights and maintain societal trust.

Key concerns emerged regarding current deficiencies in ethical oversight mechanisms for AI implementation in social work practice. Participants particularly emphasized the absence of clear standards governing:

1. Data ownership in client information collection
2. Permissible usage boundaries
3. Disclosure obligations

This regulatory gap substantially increases risks of data misuse and privacy violations.

Furthermore, both social work practitioners and technology developers identified critical liability issues requiring legal clarification - particularly concerning responsibility allocation when AI system errors lead to service failures. Such uncertainty was reported to significantly hinder professional willingness to adopt AI technologies.

Based on these findings, the study proposes four essential directions for strengthening ethical and regulatory frameworks:

1. **Domain-Specific Ethical Guidelines:** Development of AI application standards tailored to social work contexts
2. **Transparent Data Governance:** Policies ensuring data subjects' informed consent and autonomy
3. **Legal Accountability Mechanisms:** Clear liability attribution and redress procedures for AI system errors
4. **Interdisciplinary Oversight:** Cross-sector regulatory bodies to monitor compliance and equity in AI deployment

The study concludes that only through such comprehensive ethical-legal infrastructure can the field properly balance technological innovation with human rights protection, thereby establishing a sustainable foundation for AI integration in social work practice.

3.4 AI Training Needs for Social Work Professionals

This study identifies a significant gap in current training systems to adequately prepare social workers for AI integration challenges. Survey data reveals that 92% of participating social work professionals consider existing training programs insufficient in addressing AI applications, resulting in substantial difficulties in understanding and utilizing AI tools in practice.

Key findings demonstrate that:

1. **Knowledge Deficits:** Lack of fundamental AI operational knowledge fosters resistance or distrust toward emerging technologies among practitioners
2. **Application Barriers:** Without basic comprehension of AI system logic and output interpretation, professionals struggle to effectively employ AI assistance, risking potential misuse that could compromise service quality and professional judgment

To address these challenges, the study proposes comprehensive educational reforms:

1. **Academic Training:**
 - a. Incorporate essential AI knowledge (machine learning fundamentals, data ethics, algorithmic bias recognition) into core social work curricula
 - b. Develop interdisciplinary learning models facilitating collaborative projects between social work and technology students to foster mutual professional understanding
2. **Professional Development:**
 - a. Implement practice-oriented AI workshops featuring:
 - Real-case simulations
 - Ethical dilemma exercises
 - Human-AI collaboration drills

- b. Establish continuing education programs tailored to working professionals' competency levels

The study concludes that maintaining social work's professional relevance in the digital era necessitates proactive AI competency development. Transforming education and training systems represents the foundational requirement for successful AI-social work integration, ensuring practitioners can critically engage with technological tools while preserving core professional values.

3.5 Study Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this study contributes to understanding the applications and challenges of artificial intelligence (AI) in social work practice, several limitations must be acknowledged and addressed in future research.

First, the study primarily employed qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews and focus groups, with a sample size that, while diverse in professional backgrounds, remained limited and geographically concentrated, potentially affecting the external validity of the findings. Future research should expand the sample size to include social work practitioners from varied cultural and institutional contexts to enhance the generalizability of results.

Second, although thematic analysis was rigorously applied with multiple verification steps to ensure reliability, the interpretive nature of qualitative research inherently carries the possibility of researcher subjectivity. Complementing qualitative findings with quantitative methods, such as structured surveys or experimental designs, could provide large-scale statistical validation of participant attitudes and behaviors, improving objectivity and reproducibility.

Additionally, this study focused on current AI applications and participant experiences but did not assess long-term outcomes of AI integration in social work. Longitudinal studies tracking the sustained impact of AI adoption on service outcomes, client well-being, and the evolving role of social workers are needed.

Finally, while ethical and regulatory considerations were explored, deeper institutional and cross-national comparative analyses remain underdeveloped. Future studies should examine differences in AI governance frameworks, professional regulations, and technological development strategies across countries to offer more globally relevant insights for social work's digital transformation.

In summary, this study provides an initial empirical exploration of AI integration in social work, and future research should further advance this field by refining methodologies, diversifying samples, deepening analytical perspectives, and strengthening cross-disciplinary and cross-national comparisons to foster both theoretical and practical innovation.

4. Conclusion

This study examines the opportunities and challenges of integrating artificial intelligence (AI) technologies into social work practice. Findings demonstrate AI's significant potential to enhance operational efficiency and support decision-making, particularly in risk assessment and real-time case management. However, the research simultaneously reveals that AI cannot fully replace social workers' professional judgment or the nuanced interpersonal skills fundamental to the profession, as humanistic care and individualized services remain core values of social work practice.

A key contribution of this study lies in elucidating the ethical considerations accompanying AI integration, particularly regarding client privacy protection and decision-making transparency. Through examining Explainable AI (XAI) applications, we recommend that future AI system development prioritize addressing practitioners' ethical concerns to enhance both technological reliability and professional acceptance.

Furthermore, the study emphasizes the critical need for enhanced AI literacy among social workers. Educational and training systems must evolve to provide relevant curricula and skill development, ensuring

professionals can effectively adapt to technological advancements while integrating humanistic and technical competencies.

These findings bridge theoretical and practical gaps in understanding AI-social work integration while providing concrete recommendations for practice and future research. Subsequent studies should employ larger-scale quantitative methods to validate these qualitative findings and further explore the dynamic interplay between technology, humanistic values, and ethical practice. Such continued examination will promote the responsible development and harmonious implementation of AI technologies within the social work profession during this digital transformation era.

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