

ICT, Social Work and the Death of the Narrative Knowledge Base?

Jasper De Witte
Koen Hermans

KU Leuven - LUCAS

According to Lipsky, social workers not only implement, but also form policy through the use of their discretion (Lipsky, 1980). To gain greater control over professional practice, managerial mechanisms such as the ICT have been introduced in social services in the 1980s (Pollitt, van Thiel & Homburg, 2007). Parton (2009) states that the increased utilization of ICT in child welfare services and the growing importance of information has led to a shift regarding the form of knowledge and the nature of social work itself: from 'the social' to 'the informational'. The narrative knowledge base is increasingly framed by a way of thinking structured by databases, variables and numbers. Hence, it is claimed that social workers are becoming primarily information processors concerned with the gathering, sharing and monitoring of information, instead of being focused on the relational and social dimensions of their work (Parton, 2009). There are still some blind spots regarding the impact of ICT on social work. Based on a social informatics approach (Kling, 2000), we hypothesize that social workers develop certain strategies regarding ICT in order to maintain a narrative and a relational social work approach. During this presentation we present findings from a qualitative research project concerning child welfare services in Flanders, Belgium. Based on qualitative interviews with social workers, we illustrate the applied street-level strategies to deal with these information systems, in order to safeguard the client-centered approach. Preliminary findings suggest that further research should include the dynamic interactions between social workers, their social setting and informational systems.

Keywords: social work, ICT, discretion, registration systems