Navigating Digitized Public Encounters: Transforming Social Work in Swedish Welfare Services

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Comments to the reader:

With this paper, we want to discuss a thematic model with additional conclusions on how digitalization transform the public encounter in social work. The empirical data used for this paper is limited, but still serve, we believe, as a foundation to discern patterns. We are open to any kind of input that can help us in our further analysis of a larger set of data that is currently being collected in six Swedish municipalities. / Julia, Petra and Teres

Introduction

Public welfare organizing is currently undergoing a digital transformation. Numerous researchers have highlighted that this transformation has the potential to alter the nature, content, and quality of welfare services provided, with improvements in certain areas potentially accompanied by declines in quality elsewhere (Seddon, 2008; Vial, 2019). One significant factor identified as driving change in the digitalization of welfare services is shifts in the public encounter. Traditionally, public encounters within welfare services have been characterized by face-to-face interactions (Lipsky, 1980; Goodsell, 1981; Bartels, 2013). Today it is increasingly common for alternative digital communication methods to complement phone calls and physical interactions, with potential to reshape the relationship between public service providers and clients. Among other things, researchers have discussed that digitized public encounters change the underlying conditions for public work and the abilities of public professionals and clients to assert claims, influence decisions, and comprehend one another (Lindgren et al., 2019).

However, while there is widespread acknowledgment that digitalization is reshaping public encounters, e-governance literature comprehends less empirical evidence concerning professionals' or clients' experiences of digital public encounters. Public encounters are multifaceted phenomena (Bartels, 2013), and as argued by several scholars (e.g. Lindgren et al. 2019; Hupe, 2022; Prokop & Tepe, 2022), there is a need to shift from general discussions on digitalization to more lateral dimensions and in-depth examinations of the effects of digital public services. This necessitates increased recognition and empirical examination of the various impacts different digital services has on public officials' working conditions and citizens' lives as well as the relationship between them.

In the article, we refer to public encounters as "the direct and personal interactions between state representatives and their clients" (Döring et al. 2024:1). Thus, public encounters encompass a variety of interaction episodes in almost all types of public administration. The empirical focus in this study is on social work, which is motivated by the rapid technological change seen in the welfare area (López Peláez & Marcuello-Servós 2018; Nordesjö et al. 2021). Social work is being transformed and developing new digital-based intervention strategies (del Fresno García, 2015). E-social work is even described as a new area of specialization, which is affecting social intervention as a whole in a transversal manner (López Peláez & Marcuello-Servós 2018).

In the context of social work, public encounters are understood as asymmetric power relations (between citizen and social worker), where the social worker always have certain discretion, and are obliged, to apply laws and regulations in relation to situated circumstances and pieces of information related to the citizen (Svensson, Johnsson & Laanemets, 2008). Intertwined in this encounter that has executive elements, is also the social workers' relationship-building with the citizen, seen as an instrument in facilitating change, alleviating distress and devise interventions that enhance clients' responsiveness to the goals of social work (Ferguson, 2016; Rollins, 2020; Hagit Sinai-Glazer, 2020).

Due to these characteristics, the public encounter is not only understood as problematic in the social work literature, but as a practice where citizens' rights and best interests can be

(although not always is) guaranteed by the social workers' discretion (Svensson, Johnsson & Laanemets 2008). Against the backdrop of these dynamics, it is of importance to explore how digitalization furniture the scene for these encounters. Moreover, the often-mentioned lateral dimension of public services remains under-theorized (Lindgren et al. 2019) and parallel to requests for more empirical research, there are calls for more theorizing ambitions on the actual deployment and use of technology in the context of the public sphere (Pors & Pallesen, 2021; Hupe, 2022). This article not only contributes by empirically exploring the effects of digital welfare services from a public encounter perspective, but also present an analytical model of the transformative dimensions of the public encounter in a digitized welfare.

We employ narrative analysis on empirical data collected in three municipalities, to examine how use of digital technology within social services shapes the public encounter. Within narrative theory, accounts serve as frameworks for interpreting practice, while also being social constructs that contribute to the construction of reality and practice. Therefore, the descriptions provided by social workers are considered narratives reflecting their practical knowledge and actions (Czarniawska, 2007; Gubrium, 2010). Narratives permeate various aspects of everyday social work practice, as social workers address rhetorical and interactional concerns to demonstrate the responsibility and justifiability of their work (cf. Urek, 2005). The primary research question guiding this study is: *How does the use, or non-use, of digital technology shape social workers' accounts of their relationship with clients within social services?*

The public encounter – focusing discretion and the "in-between"

Traditionally, the public encounter has been viewed as problematic concerning accountability and responsibility in the exercise of public authority within a democratic system. From a legal security perspective, the public encounter must be regulated by formal responsibilities and moral obligations for safeguarding democratic government. Here, the aim is not to eliminate, but rather to limit, or democratically control the discretion involved in public encounters, to ensure that public professionals directs their behavior at the public interest instead of private gain (Weber 1922/1978). In the 1980s, Lipsky (1980) highlighted that public officials, or street-level bureaucrats, possessed great discretion which was used to find ways to make policy work for concrete situations and problems. In essence, the research demonstrated how policy was made in daily encounters of street-level workers with their clients. Also, Lipsky argued that the encounter was far from the bureaucratic ideal with impersonal detachment in decision-making. Rather than considering discretion as only problematic he raised the value of professional autonomy to meet individual needs and to make policy come into practice.

Over recent decades, the connotation of the public encounter as problematic has been abandoned in favor of viewing interactions between public officials and customers, clients, and citizens as valuable phenomena (Bartels, 2013). Bartels (2013) emphasizes that the "in-between" space should be perceived as multilayered processes of performances that "enables or disadvantages the actual abilities of public professionals and citizens to make claims,

influence decisions, and understand each other" (Bartels, 2013:476). Thus, Bartels underscores that the public encounter is a valuable phenomenon and encompasses forms of "communicative acts" that not only impact the daily lives of citizens and public professionals but also influence the capacity of governments and societies to address societal problems.

Scholars interested in the public encounter point to several factors influencing the public official – client relationship. For example, the public officials' actions, decisions and coping-behavior (Lipsky 1980), the clients' socio-economic status, administrative competence and preparedness (Nisar 2018) and the organizational setting, formal rules and operating procedures (Bartels 2013), as well as the institutional setting (Brodkin 2011). Still, scholars call for more research on what forms the "in-between" (Bartels 2013), which is highlighted as an aspect more relevant than ever due to the digital transformation impact on the common communicative platform between public officials and clients, as use of digital tools challenges 'traditional' face-to-face encounters (Lindgren et al. 2019; Pors & Pallesen 2021; Andersson et al. 2022; Hupe 2022; Nordesjö et al. 2022).

Several scholars claim to today that digital technology is transforming various aspects of public encounters. A comprehensive literature review by Lindgren et al. (2019) provides insights into how "digital" public encounters diverge from traditional interactions. While the primary purposes of public encounters—information exchange, service provision, and citizen control—remain unchanged, the nature of these interactions has evolved in terms of timing, location, interaction settings, involved actors, and requisite skills. Firstly, Lindgren et al. argue that digital technology changes the communication forms and settings in which public encounters occur. Today, communication involves different digital channels, not limited to traditional analogue forms such as letters, telephone calls, and office visits. Secondly, the setting has shifted from being strongly tied to a government office or a citizen's home to anywhere with internet access. Furthermore, the study highlights that digitalization changes the initiation, duration, and scope of encounters. Thus, Lindgren et al. (2019) suggest that the conditions surrounding the meeting between public officials and citizens have evolved.

While Lindgren et al. (2019) provide valuable insights into the conditional transformation of public encounters, other studies further elucidate the transformative dimension of the "in-between" in a digital public welfare context.

An analytical model to study digitized public encounters

Examining the research presented above we have been provided with specific insights into how digital tools affect the relationship between public officials and citizens. The literature underpinning our investigation spans research on digitalization within various governmental agencies, such as employment services, social insurance, and pension authorities, to studies specifically addressing the relationship between social workers and clients in social work. Thus, the review is broad, encompassing different welfare areas as well as less clearly defined digital tools. However, while we are strongly guided by narratives such as "public encounters," "public official-client relationship," and "social worker-client relationship," it was possible to discern a cluster of studies with results of certain relevance to our interest in

the significance of digitalization on the public encounter. Through the interplay with empirical data, three themes emerged from the literature, highlighting three tensions related to core values in social work where digitalization seem to have important transformative potential. These themes are: distance-closeness, standardization-professional discretion, and active citizen-public caretaking and constitute the themes for the analytical model we propose as useful to the studies of digitized public encounters:

Distance-closeness

The most obvious changes via digitalization are the new communication forms of the public encounter. Digital technology affects how (form) and where (setting) people meet. Common digital tools within the public sector today are digital information platforms, e-mail, digital applications forms, chat and digital meetings. For the individual citizen, information can be gained and communication can take place without interaction with public officials or visits to a specific location. Thus, digitalization can give the consequence of less frequent interaction as well as less physical interaction, i.e. a changed initiation, duration, and scope of the encounter (Pollitt 2012, Lindgren et al., 2019). Already in (2002), Bovens and Zouridis (2002) argued that digitalization, would turn street-level bureaucrats (cf. Lipsky, 1980) into screen-level bureaucrats. In other words, public officials would, according to them, in parallel with digitalization turn into bureaucrats with a distanced relationship to citizens, which in turn would give the consequence of low insight into citizens' life-situation and thus hinder the professional decision-making process. Still today, researchers raise concerns about how digital technology limits face-to-face interaction between public officials and citizens (Reamer 2013, Gillingham 2016, Hansen m.fl. 2018, Schou & Svejgaard Pors 2018). Further, this transformation could exacerbate accessibility issues, creating a "digital divide" among citizens due to limited access and knowledge of digital devices (Breit et al., 2020).

On the other hand, researchers also point to digital tools enhancing service accessibility (e.g. Bolin & Sorbring, 2017; Chan & Ngai, 2019). Ddigital technology carries the potential to enable social workers to come closer to the community, by using the diverse and flexible communication forms (and times) that citizens – not least younger generations – use (see for example Law et al 2019; Resko et al., 2017; Ford-Gilboe et al., 2017; van de Luitgaarden & van der Tier, 2018). Granholm (2016), for example, writes about *blended social work,* and the potential return to a new version of community based social work (the social worker living in the community rather than in the office) with reference to the advantages of communication technology.

Standardization- professional discretion

Another aspect of digitalization is a potential change in the nature of the public encounter due to how the professional public official can apply their professional discretion. Discretion and adjustment to individual needs is considered a fundamental part of social work and is forming the foundation for the nature and purpose of the public encounter in social service. Translations into algorithms, which is used in automated decision-making, and standardized communication forms as well as pre-printed boxes in web-applications, requires situations and services that are relatively simple and a structure in which routines can be developed. In

practice this mean less room for public officials to maneuver their work in accordance with their professional competence and the individual needs of their clients (Webb 2006, Parton 2009, Busch m.fl. 2018). Although, others claim that digital technology entails more informal ways for public officials to exercise their professional discretion. When an individual case is complex, public officials establishes a more direct contact with their clients to become better informed on their life-situations and find other ways, next to web-applications and/or questionnaires, to take individual considerations in their decision-making (Hansen et al. 2018, Jørgensen and Schou 2020).

Furthermore, scholars demonstrate that public officials, within the scope of their discretion, tend to express loyalty either towards digital systems or towards the citizens using the service (Laurent 2007; Wihlborg et al. 2016). In other words, officials consider either the systems or the needs and desires of the citizens. Laurent (2007), who examines the use of IT technology in social services, describes how technology, in the form of information and communication technology, represents a value system that partially clashes with social values. Laurent argues that IT technology embodies its own logic, "the logic of computerization," which may align with a practice associated with efficiency but conflict with professional discretion and personal engagement in citizens' life situations. Thus, professional discretion and individual considerations can be threatened, but also considered, when using digital tools. This depends on how professional discretion is exercised.

Active citizen-public caretaking

Digital technology may also affect the roles and tasks of the public official as well as the citizen (Pollitt 2012). This as well generates a changed nature and purpose of the public encounter. It is suggested that citizens in greater extent are expected to serve themselves using the digital channel for interacting with authorities (Dunleavy et al., 2006, Margretts & Dunleavy, 2013, Madsen & Kræmmergaard, 2015). Bovens and Zouridis (2002) coined the term "system bureaucracy" to illustrate how the growing number of self-service functions means that citizens today mainly interact with systems instead of public officials. One such a shift of responsibility to citizens could contribute to empowerment because clients' dependence on public officials decreases, especially when it comes to time and setting (Lindgren et al. 2019) but it can also bring disadvantages.

Madsen and Kraemmergaard (2015) writes that the self-service explosion could lead to citizens becoming their own public administrators, which in turn can affect disadvantaged groups in society. With self-service, it is no longer the authority's responsibility to ensure that the citizen receives the benefits to which she or he is entitled to, the responsibility instead lies with the citizen (Schou and Pors 2018). The public official, on the other hand, may become a "support function" by teaching and helping citizens with self-service applications (Pors, 2015) or become a processor of computerized information instead of caring for face-to-face meetings (Pollitt, 2012). In the most extreme cases, public officials become artefacts. This is a scenario occurring when automated decision-making is practiced. As opposed to a human actor, digital technology cannot discuss and negotiate public services with citizens and as highlighted by Lindgren et al. (2019) this calls for a further investigation of the asymmetrical relationship that may occur between the citizen and the public official when the latter is

replaced with a computer as central actor. When algorithms make decisions, the asymmetrical power-relationship might become even more asymmetrical. In these cases, it is impossible for citizens to negotiate decisions.

The three identified themes, or tensions, serve as a mean to better understand, but primarily to discuss, our field material. Models are simplifications, which inherently carry the advantage of providing a solid foundation for understanding. However, models can also have drawbacks. The creation of a model, like the creation of ideal types, categories, and/or typologies, never constitutes descriptions of reality but rather should be regarded as conceptual images of reality that function as tools for analysis and discussion (Weber 1904/1991). Thus, the analytical model is used as a tool to structure and categorize the field material, but not employed in a manner that obscures our task of empirically exploring how digital transformations shape public encounters.

Research approach

In order to study social workers' accounts of their relationships with clients we conducted what is similar to a multi-site ethnographic study (cf. van Duijn 2020). Whereas ethnography in a traditional sense entails the immersion of a researcher in a particular site and personally getting to know the employees of a single organization in depth, multi-sited ethnography does not confine itself to a specific location, but instead follows an object, an idea, or as in our case a narrative, on a multitude of places. Field-work is carried out within social services' departments for Economic assistance and Family and childcare. The departments studied used digital tools in varied degree. In the field-work we use a definition of digital tools (Scaramuzzino & Hjärpe 2021) that included information- and communication tools (emails, text messages, instant messages, video calls, internet, social media, apps), algorithms and databases (automated tasks) and digital document- and operational systems.

Field-material consisted of interviews and observation notes from shadowing. The interviews done so far have lasted around 60 minutes and were taped and transcribed verbatim with the consent of the interviewees. Some of the interviews were conducted in small groups (2-3 interviewees), but the majority were conducted one to one. Interviews conducted during the covid pandemic were performed with the help of Teams. Interviews done from the year of 2022 and forward were conducted face-to face. Altogether, x interviews were conducted with x interviewees. The interviews are anonymized both on individual and municipal level, which gave more freedom to the interviewees. Shadowing (Czarniawska 2007) – following social workers through their working day – gave us an opportunity to directly observe reflections on how the use of digital tools shaped the relationship between social workers and clients. During shadowing, social workers were encouraged to talk while they carried out their tasks and sometimes, they also reflected on how the working processes seemed to influence their work.

To answer the question of how the relationship between social workers and clients is formed by digital tools, an analysis was conducted on social workers' accounts of their client

relationships in their daily work. Knowledge of how professionals utilize their discretion in relation to their clients is thus accessed through language in this study. When language is the focus, emphasis is placed on how social constructions are involved in shaping our reality and practice. In this case, the focus is on the creation of professional practice, or more directly, the creation of client relationships by social workers. Thus, the interviewees' statements are regarded as a discursive construction of their practical knowledge (cf. Urek 2005, Hall & White 2005). By drawing on what social workers tell about their everyday experiences, narrative analyses can demonstrate the meanings of words and behavior in relation to the practical ways in which public encounters are manifested (cf. Bartels 2013).

Our approach to analyzing the material have been to use hypotheses or "guesses" emerged from the field material, against other collected material as well as existing research. Such an interpretative approach can be described as the researcher adopting a form of discovery logic (Glaser & Strauss 1967) in the form of "creative abduction" (Schurz 2008). In a continuous movement between fieldwork and theory, the collection of material, coding, and categorization were combined with reading previous research. Although the analysis was conducted throughout the entire process rather than after the completion of data collection, it can be outlined in four steps. Firstly, we coded the interviews and observations to identify how digital tools defined communication, interaction patterns, and working procedures between social workers and clients. Secondly, we examined literature pertaining to the narrative of "the public encounter" and compared these insights with the narratives of social workers regarding their relationships with clients. In a third step, the narratives were categorized according to three tension dynamics identified in both literature and empirical material – tensions recognized as a possible "lens" to capture re-configurations of the public encounter: distance - closeness, standardization - professional discretion, and active citizen-public - caretaking. Fourth, the descriptions of the public encounter in the municipalities were compared, providing a basis to understand and discuss similarities and differences in the material. Finally, new insights were added to our conceptual model for analyzing digitized public encounters.

Description of empirical cases

The table below gives an overview of the level and organizational context of digitalization of financial aid case work in the three municipalities included in our empirical data.

Table 1: Municipalities and level of digitalization

Municipality	Digital Technologies	Motivation for digitalization	Organizational context
South	e-application robot for financial calculations Paper application still possible	Fragmented work situation Less administration Less financial talk More qualitative time for clients	Restructuring by division of case work into three parts: 1. authority exercise (social workers) 2. economy (e-application, robot, and economy assistant) 3. supportive and motivational work (social workers)

North	Pilote-project e-application and communication platform Prepared for automatization. Paper application still possible	Better service and availability for citizens, Part of modernity More efficient and quick services Less paperwork	No change One responsible social worker
Mid	Test of e-application with selected clients Mainly paper application	Save time for clients Less documentation Availability	No change One responsible social worker

Analysis

Distance - Closeness

When it comes to distance and closeness, our analysis demonstrate that the transformative potential of digital technology can be related to the fundamental question as to whether social work can be divided into smaller independent subparts or not, where different positionings become important for expectations on digital technology and the consequences for the social worker-client relationship.

As illustrated in table 1, a motivation for using e-application and a robot in Municipality South was to enable more "qualitative" work in the social worker – client encounters. The "money talk", that is; questions and argumentations about what and how much can be applied for, are seen as "here and now questions", getting in the way for motivational and future oriented work. Based on these considerations, the economy part of financial aid case work was delegated to the robot and the economy assistant. Also in the other two municipalities, using digital solutions to a lighter extent, digital technology is attached with expectations of reducing some "unnecessary communication" with clients (more on this in the next theme). However, the main tasks that the robot and the e-application take care of in Municipality South, are defined as "core social work" in municipalities mid and north, perceived as important for the relationship building, and not so easily separated from values such as: building trust, motivational work, coming close to or understanding the client. And part of what establishes the crucial relation is the actual *conversation about economy*:

> To talk about economics is part of social work. Economy is important [...] if you are to become self-sufficient, you must know how your household finances are built and structured. [...] There is a work of change even when talking about economics. (Supervisor, Municipality North)

By this supervisor, motivational work expressed as "work of change", is not possible to distinguish from subjects that can appear as more administrative. Economy talk is mentioned as one of several aspects of the relationship building with the client and social change work.

In another quote we get more concrete information about how a contact established by meeting clients themselves, are of importance when dealing with financial questions:

> The contact is the basis for...first and foremost, that the client must understand what the client needs to do, what is requested from our side. What we have laid out for a plan for this person, but also...*what is reasonable to* apply for, how they apply, what they can apply for, how they can go about it...what authority contacts they should make and why. (Social worker, Municipality North)

From this statement we get a picture of how long-term planning and overall expectations for a client is intertwined with practical here and now details about reasonable requests and amounts. The social workers describe that meetings and conversations like these with the clients are decisive for the goal that the client should become self-sufficient, because it is in the meeting that planning, and requirements are made clear. Meeting are often a prerequisite for the work to function and good communication with the client often requires a closer relation and that there is no end to this correlation: "We have discovered that the more contact you have with the client, the better results you get (social worker, Municipality North)". These reasonings can be seen as indirect arguments for not delegating economy parts to the e-application and a robot.

In Municipality South, the social workers now relieved of both authority exercise and economy talk, notes that the client contact before the introduction of the robot was closer. To start with, they express that it is good that they don´t engage in financial questions when attending to clients, economy is separated from the supporting work and that there is now more room for motivational and supportive conversations. But precisely this can create a sense of distance, as an obstacle to overcome in relation to the clients' expectations:

> I always get clients who are new...even old, who want information about financial things that I can't give them. When I explain, they get really frustrated and continue...but aren't you *my* manager? (Social worker, Municipality South)

A sense of distance is expressed, when the social worker instead of engaging in the client´s request herself, refers the client to another professional, questions by the client perceived as part of "his/hers" social workers' task.

A more distant relationship in Municipality South was also expressed in a second way: Even though the social workers in the planning group still meet clients, even more often than before and regularly, a speed up in number of clients and changes in meeting form complicate the client relation and the opportunities for close individual contact. The social workers mention that they have time to reach *more* clients, but when workshops are held, they meet with clients in groups, which makes it *less personal*. They don´t have the same possibility to keep detailed information on a continuous basis for each client (as before). When asked if clients are at risk of falling through the cracks, a social worker in the planning group answers:

> There are a lot of people to keep track of. [...] If they don't call in themselves, it can easily happen that...if they don't take care of themselves... (Social worker, Municipality South)

This social secretary express that things (like misunderstandings or missing attachments) "can easily happen" when she is no longer in control of the case and the client's situation on a closer individual basis. Distance is connected to loss of control for the social worker and further to risks of decisions based on incomplete information.

Finally, the distance expressed by social workers in Municipality South, instead appears as descriptions of closeness in accounts by the economy assistants, who now take care of questions from clients about the applications. The economy assistants, who are "business administrators with competence in law and administration" describe the varying nature of the interactions they have with the clients where they use social and communicative skills and take supportive, therapeutic, administrative roles. Through these mundane interactions of varying characteristics, they seem to get a great deal of insight into specific life situations with importance for the relationship:

> Some days it feels like the phone is ringing all the time. It can be anything from something small to something where they simply need to vent. [...] you still feel that you have some kind of bond with the clients, even if we don't have our own clients. (Economy assistant, Municipality South)

In this quote, it is the "bond" created with the client through practical questions from the client that is of interest, since this bond is attached to situated knowledge about the families' whereabouts and circumstances, that can have a direct importance for the success of their application:

> I always think to...give them another chance, let them complete, you forget...they might not be there...they have their thing. (Economy assistant, Municipality South)

Based on knowledge about families' "thing", attained by being in close everyday contact, the family is given the possibility to complete, instead of using the incomplete application as a reason to deny the requests.

Summing up, we have identified shifting ways of talking about closeness and distance to the client both at an ideological and a practice-level. Municipalities north and mid frames the closeness obtained through an integrated approach (financial, motivational, and supportive aspects together) and its advantages as important. In Municipality South, the separation of finances from the tasks of the social workers, and the delegation of some tasks to digital technology seems to have had implications for the perceptions of a more distant relation. Social workers meet more clients but with less depth, and with a loss of control in individual cases. Instead, the closeness obtained by being "in" the application process is present in the economy assistants' accounts. Thus, the question of how digital technology transform street-level social work, can ultimately come back to perspectives on social work can be divided into sub-parts and delegated to others and to whom. The municipalities thus have different attitudes to whether finances should be an integral part of social work and it is the view of the professional role of "social worker" that determines where boundaries are drawn. A conclusion is that the introduction of digital tools should include a reflection on the question which parts of the handling process are essential for relation building and what can be left to digital tools. Finally, it is important to point out that even though a loss of closeness is described in Municipality South, it is not necessarily perceived as something negative in the

bigger picture. Closeness is just one dimension among several potentially affected by digitalization. In the next section we continue our analysis with the standardization-professional discretion dimensions:

Standardization - professional discretion

In this section we focus on in what digitalization can mean for the level of standardization of financial aid case work, and the discretion of the professionals. Based on our empirical data, we want to make three points of attention: the first two related to administrative work and the second concerning a displaced discretion from one profession to another.

A first observation is that the respondents do not describe their overall work following digitalization as becoming more standardized (than it already is), neither less discretionary for the specific approval or denial of existing applications, not even in Municipality South, who uses a robot to automatize financial calculations:

> It´s not like the robot makes any decisions, it actually just prepares, there has to be a human intermediary who makes the decisions. (Head of unit, Municipality South)

Here, the robot is described almost as an assistant, who prepares documents and information, for the decision making, where human judgement and discretion is needed. However, e-applications (in all three municipalities) and the robot (in Municipality South) are surrounded by expectations to contribute to increased discretion for professionals in another way: by releasing time for the social workers, like the function of the preparatory work mentioned in the quote. Technology can perform the standardized parts of the case work that is perceived as unnecessary for the professional to dedicate time to, as well as take care of routine documentation work following these steps:

> It should make it easier [the digital tools]. Then you get more time for the meeting with the client. [...] So instead of the social worker doing all these things the button presses, you can make it more efficient and then you will have more time for the meeting with the user, to...That's how I think about this. (Head of unit, Municipality Mid)

What is referred to as "button presses" in this quote can represent the highly administrative workload that have come to characterize financial aid case work according to the respondents, expressed by head of unit (Municipality South) as: "it was an administrative workplace". Getting stuck in administrative requirements is connected to discretion in the sense that it takes up time from motivational, long term change work, where digitalization is seen as a solution. Reducing administrative work from the social workers is mentioned as the main motives for implementing digital tools in all municipalities. While most respondents expressed this positionings as expectations, some talked about reduced administrative work as an actual experience:

> It becomes be more efficient. The client cannot submit their E-application if it is incomplete, which reduces the risk of additions that take time to send by post. Consequently, it decreases the time for processing each case." (Social worker, Municipality North)

In this case, a proactive move has been designed into the e-application, so that the need for follow up communication and completion of application is reduced, as well as the "worrying" about if the regular paper-document (as traditionally posted) has reached the clients mailbox. These are example of tasks perceived as taking time from more productive forward-moving work they can do with the clients, and according to the quote there is also a perception that these effects have happened.

Paradoxically, at the same time as these expectations of reduced administrative work are formulated, the social workers and managers also describe compensatory and parallel paperwork related to the digitalized activities as such. In Municipality Mid, who only have tested the e-application with a few clients, the first experiences did not meet the expectations: "we haven´t saved one minute, rather the contrary", one social worker expressed. The new e-application seem to create what we can call "compensatory work" when social workers have to dedicate (sometimes a lot of) time to explain and instruct clients who applies for the first time and especially to whom digitalization does not come naturally:

> Not all of the clients were familiar with the digital. There was a lot of "showing" in the beginning. Come to a meeting and I'll show you how to do it and how to apply digitally. (Social worker, Municipality Mid)

Thus, if clients orient themselves easily in the digital landscape, the e-application could free time for the social workers, but this time seems to be eaten up by the needs of those who doesn´t: "If you don´t have the basics about computers, you´ll need our help anyway", a social worker said. They also mention barriers to digitalization such as language, physical and mental health, poverty, et cetera. At the time of our study, it was still not clear if the compensatory work social workers engaged in was to be considered a temporary or consisting character of digitalized social work.

Another form of compensatory work was the discovering of mistakes, misunderstandings, misinterpretations, or missing information handed in by the client in the e-application system, which could be to their detriment. In this example the compensatory work of the economy assistant in Municipality South is highlighted:

> I think that the individual assessment that a person can make, it disappears...when a robot does it. [...] but at the same time our colleagues (note: the financial secretaries) are quite talented in detecting if…or even the clients are pretty good at calling in if it is something has gone wrong and then the finance secretary can keep in touch and talk to them and get information about why it has become this way? (Social worker, Municipality South)

Apparently, individual considerations are at risk of getting lost when the preparation of cases takes place in an automatized way. However, in this case the municipality's economy assistants complement the robot's inabilities by assisting the clients, discovering errors, and finding ways to correct them. In relation to discretion, one can reflect on the process becoming dependent on the economy assistants, or the clients themselves, discovering the errors. Parts following digitalization, that potentially could be to the detriment of the client is hindered by the fast that a professional compensate for technological fail. If this

compensatory work, often of administrative nature, in the end surpasses the time released by the help of technology in other ways, is an important question to follow and document further.

A third observation regarding professional discretion is the fact that the division of the case work in Municipality South, seem to have displaced parts of professional discretion from social workers to the economy assistants. Partly this is a consequence of the economy assistants' delegated responsibility to be the formal decision maker informed by the calculations made by the robot. Partly, however it is a consequence of the mundane day to day interaction with the clients seeking financial aid, and the information they receive through these interactions. Information about the clients' specific circumstances from one day to another, how they comply with planned activities and programs, can be relevant for the citizens' possibility to get financial aid or not. In the economy assistants' own description of their area of responsibility there are signs of perceived discretion allowing for them to take individual circumstances into consideration for the decisions:

> I think we have quite a lot to say about...if it would be an interrupted planning or so, I think...as I mentioned earlier, it may still be the case that we do not stand behind that decision. […] I may have read myself somewhere that they may not have appeared at their internship or something, so shall we review it together [with the social worker in the planning group]?. (Economy assistant, Municipality South)

Situated knowledge that the economy assistant have obtained by reading some of the case-related documents, becomes the reason for asking the social worker to take an extra look at the case together with the economy assistant. In many ways, the economy assistant becomes the human competence needed to complement the inabilities of the robot. They ensure that individual considerations are taken and support the shortcomings that follow when the application procedure becomes strictly manual-based in the form of an algorithm. This requires a certain proactivity, which the economy assistant illustrates with an example of how he proceeds with incomplete applications. In summary; we can note that the discretion for individual considerations in relation to the client has partly shifted from one professional group to another in Municipality South. The professional discretion in the work is largely associated with the part of the case management process that is linked to the clients' individual applications, and that work is currently handled by economy assistants. Thus, the work of the economic assistants, is far from routine work auditing the calculations of the robot, but an interactive and dynamic engagement very similar to what we normally think about as social work.

Active citizen – public caretaking

This theme deals with the question of how digitalization stimulates a push towards putting more, less or unchanged responsibility on the assistance seeking citizen. Analyzing our empirical data, we can conclude that digitalization follows a discourse that deals with the fact that more responsibility should be placed on individual citizens. In Municipality South, and also Municipality North, we find a rhetoric about how activities can be organized to promote an active citizen where digital technology plays a part.

The organization of the work in Municipality South gives particular expression to this thought, as the social workers in the planning group are largely engaged in activation activities. Conversations with the respondents, about the client's role, make visible that the relationship between social workers and client is affected by a changed expectation of the client's responsibility. The head of unit for financial secretaries and social secretaries in both groups all tell us that the digital development brought about a changed view of the client from being passive to being more active. The change is intended primarily for the social workers to move away from notions that clients cannot take responsibility themselves. The message in the program called "Own Power", is that clients want and can do the right thing for themselves:

> It's as we say...it is by one´s own power, that one frees up resources for the individual (Head of Unit, Municipality South).

Or as expressed by a social worker in the planning group:

> The client can do it himself - it's part of the new organization (Social worker, Municipality South).

Practically, the new image of clients is for example expressed by the fact that clients can independently make their own application digitally, without a contact with a social worker. In addition, requirements are set for efforts that the clients must implement for to receive their assistance, in the so-called action plans. It can be about introducing oneself to several companies, or writing a CV. If the action plan is not followed by the client, their financial assistance can be denied. But the new image of the client is also expressed in other contexts. The head of unit in Municipality South says that before the change, social workers paid the clients' invoices. Today, however, it is something that the clients have to do themselves:

> We paid invoices for the residents as well. Otherwise, we thought that... maybe the money won't come away and they can't... then we chose to stop it because we didn't have the authority to do that, to pay invoices that way. It turned out very well that the vast majority can actually pay their rent themselves (Head of Unit, Municipality South).

In Municipality North, the social workers talk about self-responsibility in a similar way as in Municipality South, but in relation to "my pages", which open up for clients to take part and search for information on their own. They also describe some initial resistance from citizens who were expected to do things that the social worker earlier did for them.

The approach in Municipality Mid instead goes in the other direction, where the focus is on public care and where digitalization is not seen as particularly useful in social work, precisely because it is not seen as a tool for relationship- and trust building. The emphasized focus on the social worker- client relationship in Municipality Mid also seems to affect the expectations on the different roles. The social workers describes, as previously mentioned, that in their role they try to be a safe haven, or an anchor, for the client. They also describe that it is important that the clients are taken care of when they apply for financial aid:

> It is important to us that they feel well taken care of. (Social worker, Municipality Mid)

The respondents' accounts about the client role include descriptions that it is difficult to generalize clients' life situation and that there must be consideration for clients who find it difficult to independently fill in the application and stay up-to-date in the case management process, for example due to language barriers and mental illness. It is important to "meet people where they are" (social worker, Municipality Mid) and to work based on their conditions. The social workers also provide expressions that empathy is important:

> You have to be able to mentalize, I also think, to be able to understand how they feel. It thinks I am very important. (Social worker, Municipality Mid)

At the same time, it should be mentioned that it is pointed out that financial assistance should not be without requirements and that they are careful not to take over the responsibility that lies with the client:

> One should not take over the responsibility completely, we take care of that (Social worker, Municipality Mid).

However, being supportive is described as a prerequisite for being able to make demands. As expressed, "making demands can be supportive" (Social worker) and one does not exclude the other: "I intend to support and control, you can do that at the same time" (Social worker).

Thus, there is a rhetoric in Municipality South and Municipality North where digitalization and activation go hand in hand and can best be understood as a kind of "pedagogy" for how clients should achieve self-sufficiency. A pedagogy that is in line with the notion that greater personal responsibility leads to a form of "empowerment". In Municipality Mid, the least digitalized municipality we see a different discourse, more circled around feeling safe and cared for and with reference to the close and personal relationship. If the lower level of digitalization and the public caretaking discourse have a causal relationship in either direction, or if it is just a coincidence, is not possible to conclude based on the limited empirical data in this study. We can conclude that in our data, the activation discourse was more prominent in the two municipalities with relatively high level of digitalization.

Conclusions and discussion (to be developed)

The introduction of digital tools has different consequences depending on how they are handled and interpreted. To understand the digital transformation of public encounters one has to separate the introduction of the digital tools from different human and organizational reactions to the introduction of the digital tools.

Digitalization's potential to reshape the public encounter can be related not so much to the digitalization as such, but as to parallel reorganization and restructuring principles where digital technology becomes a tool. For example, along the dimensions of distance and closeness; an increased distance perceived in Municipality South following digitalization was traced to the underlying assumption that financial aid case work could be divided into smaller subparts where one could be automized.

There are expectations on digitalization to reduce administrative burdens and free time for social workers in today´s street level bureaucracies. However, digitalization as such can create the need for same amount of (or more) administrative compensatory and parallel paper work.

Changed work roles, as a result of digital tools taking over work tasks, can result in an increased distance between social workers and clients and that with digitalization comes a rhetoric that deals with the fact that more responsibility should be placed on individual citizens. For the individual client, this can lead to an increased responsibility for pursuing their own case in relation to the authority and thereby impair clients' access to welfare services for clients. However, this does not have to be the case. At the same time, the results of the study show that social workers and economy assistants largely regard the digital tools as a complement, which broadens accessibility and that the awareness of risks of digital exclusion gives a sensitivity before whether clients need support.

The work of the social workers and economy assistants is an illustrative example of what constitutes the "human contribution" in relation to digital tools. However, like several other researchers do (Deursen & Van Dijk 2010, Breit & Salomon 2015, Fugleveit & Lofthus 2021), we want to urge caution when it comes to replacing all communication with digital tools so that citizens who do not have the capacity risk fall through the cracks. As the distance increases, insight into the clients' life situation decreases, and the question is what happens to the social workers' conditions to help clients who have an increased need for support? A central conclusion that we can draw from the study is that it is important that there are structures to capture different kinds of needs of citizens, both the need and desire for close contact, and the need and desire for own control and overview. Digitalization in the form of a "robot" for decision preparation, "My pages" for communication and the E-application can thus be used to widen the spectrum on which needs can be met, while at the same time the risk that the need for closeness is obscured needs to be kept in mind and possibly compensated.

The organization of the digital work in Municipality South provides a basis for reasoning about the relation between, on the one hand, "the human factor" and "the human contribution". The robot is a way to reduce the "human factor", an expression that often has negative associations. When humans interact with technology, they are often perceived as the weakness in the systems, and the definition of "the human factor" indicates that it is about humans' inability to function flawlessly (Arweström Jansson 2017). However, the economy assistants' compensatory work in relation to the robot in Municipality South rather illustrates the reverse. The economy assistants constitute the "human contribution" to the technology. In relation to technology, humans are thus not a factor that makes mistakes and creates problems to a greater extent. Rather, the situation is an example of the reverse: the economy assistants illustrate what is the "human contribution" and cover up the inabilities of technology. When we compare the three municipalities, we can state that digitalization has given rise to a division of social work in Municipality South. In the two other municipalities, with little or almost no degree of digitalization, social work is based on the same case manager handling both finances and support.

Our findings confirm existing research showing that digital tools can contribute to activation and a more active client role for those citizens who prefer an independent procedure (Boll et al. 2015, Hansen et al. 2018, Jørgensen and Schou 2020). The only question is whether "empowerment" is an opportunity for all clients? This could lead to clients who are unable to run their own affairs not having access to the public support they are entitled to.

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