

Social work in the age of disconnection: Narrative case studies

Michael Jarrette-Kenny and Miriam Jaffe (Eds.)

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I was very excited to read this book as, having been involved in research about the use of digital technologies in social work (Cooner et al., 2020), I was keen to hear more about how social workers can engage with it ethically. I was especially interested in learning more about how the move to online services necessitated by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic had created opportunities in social work practice given my experiences in rapidly pivoting to teaching social work, particularly interpersonal skills, online. However, what I found—which perhaps I should have anticipated with the title(!)—with this collection of case studies was more an exploration of how digital technologies can create disconnection. While I felt this was a missed opportunity and perhaps reflects a bias against digital technology *and* a response to being forced to use technology (versus a wanted, planned, and/or slower integration), there is still much to be gained from this text.

Each chapter features a practitioner detailing the effects of technology on their relationship with their clients—technology that ranges from a regular group phone call to social media and Zoom calls. For example, the first chapter, by Lauren Busfield, sets out to explore how Gen Z engages in activism online and how that intersects with their emotional intelligence. The practitioner here notes that young people, especially those marginalised, can now connect more easily with like-minded people because of access to digital technology. Such access can be positive and affirming, as noted in an example of a

client who was gender non-conforming—however, it can also be the opposite. For example, the same client, who was Black, felt less safe online after George Floyd was killed, as comments online left them feeling angry and frustrated. While noting the challenges and limitations of online activism—especially in countering systemic issues such as racism—Busfield also notes the need for online activists to pause and take regular time out.

Finding connection online is also a key theme explored by Russell Healy in his chapter exploring how technology helps create a sense of identity. Healy achieves this by considering how medical technology has worked and, more importantly, *not* worked for the transgender community. Healy summarises the history of transgender healthcare and notes that now information technology, in the form of the internet, is helping young people connect with others and make realisations about their own experiences and dreams in ways that simply were not possible for previous generations of transgender youth. Using a client case study, Healy shows how a young client forms and re-forms their identity by exploring a range of identities online.

I was particularly affected by the chapter by Lauren Snedeker about facilitating a group phone call for caregivers of people with dementia. I admit it was a little surprising to see a book about digital technology featuring something as (deceptively) simple as a group telephone call; however, the simplicity of this intervention was what made it so appealing. Here I was reminded

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of my time spent phone counselling, honing and refining my listening skills. On the phone, you have no other sense to rely on, so, as a practitioner, you must deepen those listening skills. Indeed, Snedeker noted that the beauty of the group phone call was that participants could reveal and disclose things “without *seeing* other people’s judgment” (p. 44). In a seemingly relentless drive to newer technology, reflections like this remind us that not all clients can, or indeed, *want* to use things like Zoom and that we as practitioners need to have many different communication tools in our kete. Snedeker reminds us that we need to do what works for our clients.

Two of the chapters, those by Wendy Winograd and Michael Jarrette-Kenny, dealt with issues of attachment and digital technology. Both worried about the impact that technology has on our brains and, thus, our neurobiology, suggesting that we risk damaging ourselves biologically. Both also ask interesting and necessary questions about how we attach to other people via technology; however, some readers (like myself) might find the references to neurobiology unnecessary given that brains are plastic and respond and change in response to *any* stimuli and brain science claims are often overstated (Wastell & White, 2017). Indeed, change is not always negative—changes could be neutral, or even advantageous.

Winograd’s chapter was most interesting when she detailed the challenges social workers can experience with digital technology while working online and in person with clients—many of which I am sure other practitioners can relate to. Winograd notices that clients are often distracted by their phones during sessions, disrupting precious time. She notes there is rarely an easy answer to this challenge and wonders about *over-connection* and attachment to our devices. Winograd also wonders if human connection, attachment, is possible without being physically in the same space with someone and explores this

conundrum through client case studies. She explains that her relationship with a younger client *deepened* after they were forced online due to Covid-19 and wonders whether a *less* embodied space gave more autonomy. Winograd concludes that the answer to the aforementioned questions is perhaps yes *and* no: there is a tension in wanting connection and autonomy that possibly digital technology can assist with.

Another noteworthy chapter was that of Zakia Clay, exploring how a community-based outreach programme had to pivot to more *remote* technologies during the pandemic and the challenges and opportunities it brought for clients and practitioners alike. There are stories in this chapter that practitioners who worked through these times will be able to relate to: worries about risk to self and clients, burning out, figuring out who had to be seen in person and who could be contacted via tools like Zoom. However, Clay notes that, while using tools like Zoom was helpful and necessary, there are significant and unresolved questions about the digital divide beyond who has the technology and who does not (for example, who can afford upgrades, access and who has the knowledge to use it). Like the Snedeker chapter, Clay reminds us that we can only use technology insofar as it helps clients, and the imposition of technology on all clients means that some may be alienated. Again, we must ensure that, while we embrace the new, we do not completely discard the old.

Overall, the book asks some essential questions about the use of technology in clinical social work settings and will be especially useful to those who work closely with clients (in group or individual settings). The questions they ask are those that many (if not all) practitioners working during Covid-19 will have wondered about as they and their clients wrestled (and continue to wrestle) with technology and the frustration of switched-off cameras and microphones.

References

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Reviewed by **Eileen Joy**, University of Auckland.