

Reddit as a Forum for Social Service Workers

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ABSTRACT

Social work professions are increasingly studied as key sites for understanding precarity, affective labor, and the future of care work. However, little research has explored social workers' recordkeeping practices. This study expands on existing research on records and documentation through engaging with users of "R/Socialwork," a subforum on the internet forum Reddit.com. Utilizing a multimodal approach drawing on participant observation, in-depth interviewing, and discourse analysis, this research sought to answer the following research question: How do social workers understand their use of and interaction with records? Findings indicated widespread frustration with documentation paradigms in the profession, with variation based on sub-field and proximity to clinical practice. Users expressed this frustration in a variety of ways, with some utilizing the forum to support entrepreneurial approaches to problems in the field, while others used the site as an alternative form of recordkeeping, documenting their emotional responses.

KEYWORDS

Recordkeeping; Documentation; Reddit; Social Work; Entrepreneurship.

INTRODUCTION

A substantial body of literature has explored recordkeeping practices in various organizational settings and examining documentation has been a core part of archival science and information science literature for several decades. (Drake, 2014; Trace, 2002; Yakel, 1996, 2001) A significant amount of research has also investigated social work professions, which are increasingly studied as key sites for understanding precarity, affective labor, and the future of care work. However, little research has examined recordkeeping practices in social work contexts or explored how those practices are implicated in larger labor questions. This project is a first attempt at shedding light on these practices, by examining the experiences of users of the subreddit "R/Socialwork", an online community comprising over 40,000 members, most of whom self identify as social workers or students interested in the field. The site was chosen for the broad range of social work specializations and geographic regions represented.

METHODS

For the investigation into the recordkeeping practices of the subreddit users, we employed a multimodal approach drawing on digital participant observation, interviews, and discourse analysis. Over the course of several months, we observed and interacted with members of the "R/socialwork" community, taking detailed field notes and writing processual memos. After initial observation, we recruited six participants for in-depth interviews. Participants had a variety of educational backgrounds. Their specific occupations reflected the array of careers under the umbrella of social work, ranging from hospital and social service settings to consultancy and policy work. Similarly, participants reported differing levels of Reddit use and overall comfort with technology. Participants were selected during participant observation through theoretical sampling based on participants forum use. Recruitment prioritized active users who represented a range of social work careers. All participants had to be 18 years of age and members of the subreddit. Interviews followed an interview guide which was modified iteratively throughout the project. The interview data and processual memos were analyzed through qualitative coding using both In Vivo and Concept coding to guide the analysis (Saldana 2013). The data from observation and interviewing was complemented by discursive analysis of three specific media objects. These artifacts (the PHQ9 suicide risk assessment form, a video commercial for the teletherapy service Betterhelp, and a news article about the city of Austin, TX's MyPass blockchain ID project) were identified during data collection. The analysis of these artifacts helps situate the other data in a broader social context. Taken together, this multi-method approach allowed for deeper understanding of the complex social dynamics behind users' recordkeeping practices and forum engagement.

DISCUSSION

Recordkeeping and Entrepreneurship

In our interviews we asked several questions about how our interlocutors thought about recordkeeping and documentation practices. Many of them described documentation as all-consuming or overwhelming. The participants we spoke with generally realize that documenting their work is a core part of their job but had

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significant frustrations both with the time dedicated to documentation and the technology and systems required to complete it. One participant noted spending 25-30% of their day completing paperwork, while another noted that of their daily work, “pretty close to 70-75% is record keeping in some way shape or form.” Complaints surrounding this work included having to duplicate information within multiple systems, outdated computers breaking down frequently, and systems logging out in the middle of creating a report and losing information. It became apparent in our interviews and observation that some individuals are trying to minimize these challenges through attaching themselves to an entrepreneurial mindset, echoing findings by Avle et al., (2019). One participant described starting a social work consultancy business focusing on IT as a way of addressing what they saw as problems in the field. They described utilizing the subreddit to “see what kind of questions people were asking,” to help guide their consulting work. Other users also saw frustrations with recordkeeping as challenges to be solved through entrepreneurial solutions and envisioned the subreddit as a source of information and feedback on their ideas.

Subreddit as Informal Recordkeeping

Other participants used the subreddit for expressing frustration rather than brainstorming solutions. This appeared in at least 4 of the 6 interviews. One participant expressed enjoyment in seeing these kinds of posts because as a new social worker it gave them more intimate details of what they could expect from their future jobs. They stated, “Sometimes I like seeing posts about people ranting every now and again... As weird as it sounds I like reading about people and their struggles with that, especially with the field that I’m going into. It’s almost like, ‘okay this is what I have to look forward to,’ but at the same time knowing that there is support there when people do have these issues coming up.” Despite the constant need for documentation as a part of their job responsibilities, there are few opportunities for the social workers to record their own responses to the challenges of their jobs. While many therapy, counseling, and social service jobs include formalized debriefing through individual conversations known as supervision or clinical supervision, these interactions are spoken, not written. Additionally, supervision is often done with one’s supervisor and the manager-employee power dynamic looms over those interactions. With this understanding, the practice of posting an emotive or affective expression became legible as a process of documentation, an insight significantly aided by Cifor’s (2016) writing on archives and affect. This informal online documentation can be understood as a repository where emotions are stored and witnessed, a place for social workers to publicly document their own experiences.

CONCLUSION

Social workers experience widespread frustration with documentation paradigms in the field, with variation based on sub-field and proximity to clinical practice. Users expressed this frustration on “R/Socialwork” in a plethora of ways, with some utilizing the forum to support entrepreneurial approaches to problems in the field, while others used the site as an alternative form of recordkeeping, documenting their emotional responses. Two major themes in these manifestations were a turn towards entrepreneurship and the documentation of emotional experiences. The multi-modal methodology, and the results it produced, are not intended to provide definitive proof of a paradigm that is generalizable to the entire populations of social workers or redditors. Rather, this study offers novel insight into how a particular online forum functioned in its user’s lives, identifying and opening numerous opportunities for further study, including the potential of archival studies frameworks for understanding online communities. Avenues for further study include sustained focus on the design of recordkeeping systems in social service contexts, additional longitudinal analysis of forum post emotional content, and deepened investigation into social service entrepreneurship. As precarious care work proliferates, understanding the challenges these workers face and their responses to those challenges becomes increasingly important.

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