ICT in Social Care Practices: Opportunities and Critical Issues

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ABSTRACT

In the present article, the author will discuss the critical questions associated with the use of ICT in social care practices as well as the possibilities generated by them in terms of innovation, effectiveness and efficiency of solutions and responses. At this level, she will underline the connection between social care and ICT, namely in what concerns the information, knowledge and participatory processes and the strategic diagnosis of needs and resources.

KEYWORDS

Critical Issues, ICT, Innovation, Opportunities, Social Care

INTRODUCTION

Since the nineties, especially with the development of digital technologies, the “information society” concept (as well as its dark side of increased surveillance and control) has become central. In this context, the relationship between new technologies and the fulfillment of the Lisbon Strategy’s assumptions, particularly in terms of balance between growth, economic competitiveness, and social cohesion, is stressed in various documents of international organizations.

The OECD Report (2013), ICTs and the Health Sector Towards Smarter Health and Wellness Models, for instance, underline that the sustainability of health and care systems will be intrinsically linked with the governments’ capacities to respond, with increased quality and efficiency, to new and more complex care challenges and expectations. For this, it is fundamental the willingness to innovate in care approaches and to implement participatory, preventive and personalised intelligent models of care and services, namely by using technological applications and devices. Even if the issues of privacy, acceptance, usability and adequate storage of larger and shared data of clients or patients should be more discussed and carefully considered.

In the same way, the Digital Agenda for Europe (2014) puts on the front page the lack of integration between health and social care systems and the derived consequences for efficiency and equity of measures, especially in what concerns vulnerable people, as dependents and elderly.

In this perspective, the introduction of ICT in social care and social service organizations materialize a requirement of today’s’ society, in providing more efficient and effective practices. But,
at the same time, it promotes a set of tensions arising from the reshaping of an interventional sector that is traditionally distant and resistant to all the “impersonal” mediation processes with users and other professionals.

However, the commitment towards change, regarding development and social justice, as well as the openness to innovation and effectiveness are today more than ever, the cornerstones of a social care system capable of asserting itself as a strategic element in the construction of alternative, equitable and balanced societies.

Nowadays, a proactive response is necessary for the social and economic challenges that society faces; challenges that have profound implications for social care methods, goals and populations. In this sense, we have to consider that many of the social work theories and classical methods were conceived in very different contexts. Now a new paradigm seems to arise associated with the complexity of global, unpredictable and technological societies. This new paradigm puts the requirements of effectiveness, efficiency, accountability, costs, measurability and speed of results on the front page. Many authors (Gillingham, 2011; Ince & Griffiths, 2011; Langan, 2009; Parton, 2008; Peckover, White & Hall, 2008; Pithouse et al, 2012; Mitchel & Sloper, 2008; White et al., 2010) and professionals emphasize the potential dangers of this emergent model of thinking and acting for the social work core values and specific approaches. These are associated mainly with quality, proximity, interaction, long-term processes and holistic perspectives.

Notwithstanding the fact that these critics may be very pertinent and deserve more discussion and research, it is a fact that social work, like any other professions nowadays, is inevitably plunged into the “information age”. The ways to adapt and to benefit, or to resist, to this new conditions will induce the role that social work is enabled to play, now and in the future. As West & Heath (2011) underline “a reactive answer to new technologies limits opportunities to influence the core issues” (p. 209). So, it is crucial for social work to reshape and update models, without losing the core values but learning how to strategically use, in the best way, for a “best practice” (Hill & Shaw, 2011), the tools and potentialities of ICTs.

In fact, although some ethical and methodological problems that need further debate and reflection, the use of ICT can increase the possibilities: a) to formulate (and evaluate) new and better social and political answers to material and immaterial (cultural, social), objective and subjective user needs; b) to define innovative strategies to intervene in the causes of social-economic problems, conceiving new citizenship spaces and policies that can effectively promote quality of life, and finally, c) to create a culture of social entrepreneurship, data sharing and “hybridization” of responses (new forms of articulation between public, private and third sector). This is not only important but essential, in societies, like ours, characterized by uncertainty and complexity, then claiming for new understanding and intervention processes with increased efficacy and equity.

The identification of social needs, and above all the underlying criteria determination, evaluation and prioritization, requires, especially given the current context, renewed reflection and new sharing and assessment strategies. The diagnosis of unmet needs, considered by many authors (Murray, Caulier-Grice & Mulgan 2010) as a basis for social innovation, actually requires a broad and deep discussion and new participatory strategies that may be enhanced, for instance, by the use of ICTs, promoting: innovative forms of social diagnosis, capable of identifying and articulating capabilities and opportunities; interventions evaluation (especially user needs satisfaction and impacts of policies and measures); follow-ups and production of shared indicators and processes between social organizations and professionals; inter-sector/inter-institutional articulation or shared experiences evaluation; scaling-up of innovative interventions or “best practices”, on a local or a global dimension.
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