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A Qualitative Study of Social Work and Vulnerable Clients in Danish Job Centres

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Alexandrina Schmidt

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ABSTRACT

Denmark has one of the most digitalised public sectors in the world. Being a social worker within a digital public organisation requires the use of vast information and communication technologies. Being enrolled in such an organisation as a client implies being able to navigate, for example, an array of digital self-help solutions, systems such as digital ID, complete online applications, and digital mailing systems. In this increasingly ubiquitous digital society, research interests tend to overlook the mundane technologies that support and govern our everyday lives and activities. This thesis foregrounds these mundane technologies by investigating their role in social work with vulnerable clients and in vulnerable clients' agentic practices.

This thesis builds on qualitative interviews with social workers (n = 24) and vulnerable clients (n = 17) enrolled in Danish job centres. It takes a constructivist grounded theory approach to the investigation, combined with a symbolic interactionist theoretical approach. Such a combination offers systematic tools for analysis and approaches data with a focus on social interaction, context, and identity negotiations.

This thesis is comprised of three articles. Article one explores social workers' use of a digital CV tool. The study shows how social workers may collect and use information strategically through mundane technologies such as the CV tool. Article two examines the identity negotiations of vulnerable clients in response to the digital requirements of job centres. It examines how clients may reconcile contrasting demands to their positions by performing agentic vulnerability. Article three investigates social workers' and clients' role performances in welfare encounters via phone where non-verbal cues of interaction are absent. The study shows that phone mediation may visualise the consequentiality of welfare encounters for both social workers and clients, which may otherwise be taken for granted in routinised face-to-face encounters.

Overall, the thesis demonstrates how mundane technologies partake in the social worker–client relationship. It also shows that such technologies can both enable and constrain social work practices and clients' agentic practices and provide opportunities for everyday resistance. This thesis suggests extending the focus from new and spectacular digital technologies to the mundane in the digital.

DANSK RESUMÉ

Danmark har en af verdens mest digitaliserede offentlige sektor i verden. At være professionel i en offentlig organisation indebærer derfor omfattende brug af information og kommunikationsteknologier. At være klient af en offentlig organisation sætter krav til at kunne begå sig digitalt i en bred vifte af systemer, såsom digitale selvbetjeningsløsninger, MitID, digitale ansøgninger og brug af E-boks og digital post. I denne digitale virkelighed overser forskningen imidlertid de hverdagsteknologier, som understøtter og reproducerer vores hverdagsliv og daglige gøremål. Denne afhandling sætter fokus på sådanne hverdagsteknologier og undersøger hvilken rolle disse teknologier spiller i de professionelles arbejde med udsatte borgere og udsatte klienters agens.

Denne afhandling bygger på kvalitative interviews med professionelle (24) og udsatte klienter (17) i danske jobcentre. Studiet anvender en konstruktivistisk grounded theory tilgang i kombination med symbolsk interaktionisme. Denne kombination giver mulighed for en systematisk tilgang til data og en analyse med fokus på social interaktion, situeret kontekst og identitetsforhandlinger.

Afhandlingen består af tre artikler. Artikel et viser professionelles brug af et digitalt CV-værktøj. Studiet viser, at professionelle kan indsamle og bruge information strategisk i deres arbejde med udsatte borgere ved brug af hverdagsteknologier, såsom CV-værktøjet. Artikel to undersøger udsatte klienters identitetsforhandlinger i respons til jobcentrets digitale krav. Denne artikel undersøger, hvordan klienter forhandler de modsatrettede krav til deres positioner ved både at udtrykke agens og sårbarhed. Artikel tre belyser professionelles og klienters roller i velfærdsmødet, når dette møde foregår via en telefon, hvor der ikke er non-verbal kommunikation. Dette studie peger på, at telefon medieringen visualiserer, hvad der er på spil for deltagerne i velfærdsmøder, som ellers bliver taget for givet i rutinerede ansigt-til-ansigt velfærdsmøder.

Overordnet viser afhandlingen, hvordan hverdagsteknologier spiller en rolle i velfærdsmødet mellem professionelle og klienter. Afhandlingen viser, hvordan hverdagsteknologier både kan muliggøre og begrænse socialt arbejde og klienters agens. Endelig illustrerer afhandlingen også, at hverdagsteknologier indeholder muligheder for at udøve hverdagsmodstand for både professionelle og klienter. Afhandlingen foreslår at udvide fokusset fra nye og spektakulære teknologier til hverdagsteknologier.

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PART ONE

'Well, it is completely impossible to work without Facit [electronic client record system]. That is where the client's information is collected. If it doesn't work, it is like being off. In the beginning with these systems, they can't do a bloody thing, and there are a thousand extra things you have to do. But then you figure it all out and build up a routine. Then, suddenly [the system operators] tell you that you must do it all differently. Then, you must build up a new routine because they have added one new button.'

Tina, social worker

Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis investigates social workers' use of mundane technologies in their work with vulnerable clients and demonstrates vulnerable clients' agentic practices within digitalised job centres. As exemplified in the introductory quote by social worker Tina, some technologies have become so indispensable to everyday life routines in public service organisations that it is difficult to work without them. Such technologies have become mundane by being well integrated into everyday life routines, supporting and reproducing social life. The mundanity of such practices becomes visible when a 'new button' causes trouble and provokes the reestablishment of everyday routines. This thesis seeks to foreground the role of the mundane technologies in the increasingly digitalised society.

In this thesis, I adopted the symbolic interactionist approach, which emphasises socially constructed processes and situated contexts, to examine 24 interviews with social workers and 17 interviews with vulnerable clients in Danish job centres. This thesis consists of three articles, each exploring different situations within job centres involving mundane technologies. Article one examines a digital tool in social workers' practice. Article two considers clients' responses to the digital requirements of the job centre. Finally, article three focuses on the mobile phone.

When work for this thesis initiated in 2020, media and research were widely preoccupied with the future effects of algorithmic solutions, intelligent machines, etc. (Breinstrup, 2020; Frederiksen

and Hammer-Jakobsen, 2020; Winthereik, 2019, 2020). Denmark was and still is at the top of the world ranking for e-government development (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2022). Scholars were discussing AI errors, the dark sides of digitalisation, technological surveillance, and so on (e.g. Zuboff, 2019; O'Neil, 2017; Eubanks, 2018). This constituted my initial interest and sparked a curiosity about what digitalisation meant for vulnerable and disadvantaged people. I anticipated that my research on social work and vulnerable clients would surround intelligent algorithms and automated digital solutions, which at that time could be found in employment services. However, I soon realised that few intelligent digital solutions for working with vulnerable clients were in place or at a researchable stage. Rather, what populated and troubled the everyday lives of the social workers I spoke to were not intelligent job matches and predictive algorithms, but mundane technologies such as information systems, digital journal notation systems, phones, e-mail, and administrative systems which aid the management of the client's case and social work. Thus, in interviewing social workers, their talk revolved around mundane digital technologies that supported their daily work and had become ordinary and taken for granted.

Through interviews with vulnerable clients, I learned that there was a difference between using technology in everyday life and digital engagement with job centre requirements, for instance, online applications. Some clients could navigate the digital infrastructure of the job centre but refused or neglected meeting digital requirements such as receiving digital mail, booking meetings, or completing applications online. Other clients expressed that they had difficulties navigating the job centre's digital requirements, while they had integrated a range of digital systems into other parts of their everyday lives, such as streaming, digital bank apps, and digital ID. The social workers explained that they worked with both digitally competent and incompetent clients. Some clients struggled with the digital requirements of public services such as digital mail, completing online applications, and booking meetings online, whereas others could learn. Overall, in the interviews, both social workers and clients discussed mundane technologies and simple systems. Thus, I was puzzled by the mundanity present within the digitalised job centres.

Existing scholarly studies emphasise that digitalisation changes public sector organisations through technology that is noticeable and spectacular, but also mundane and unnoticed (Plesner and Justesen, 2022). Noticeable and spectacular technologies include algorithmic solutions, intelligent job matches, predictive algorithms, and risk-assessment tools. In contrast, mundane and unnoticed technologies comprise well-known tools and technologies, such as mobile phones,

office computer applications, client record systems, and well-integrated information systems. Mundane technologies support and reproduce everyday organisational life and social interaction and are well integrated into our daily lives (Dourish et al., 2010; Greenwood and Cox, 2023; Michael, 2006; Pink et al., 2017). Such technologies have become invisible and taken for granted in everyday life, owing to their pervasiveness and ubiquity (Lupton, 2015: 2; Trittin-Ulbrich et al., 2021). Recent research calls for engagement with the mundanity of digitalisation, which pays attention to aspects of digitalisation that escape popular and spectacular attention, as they are perceived as boring and unremarkable (Mullan and Wajcman, 2019; Pink et al., 2017; Plesner and Justesen, 2022). With this thesis, I respond to such calls and draw attention to the mundane digital technologies that social workers and vulnerable clients use and respond to in digitalised job centres. The overarching research question for the thesis is as follows:

What role do mundane technologies play in social work with vulnerable clients and in vulnerable clients' agentic practices within Danish job centres?

The overall research question is answered through three sub-research questions, each comprising an article.

1. How do social workers use the digital CV, a digital information system, in their interactions with vulnerable clients?

Through interviews with social workers, article one explores the social workers' usage of the digital CV. The study demonstrates that social workers use the digital CV tool differently according to the perceived vulnerability of clients. The CV tool allows social workers to collect and utilise information strategically. It shows that strategic choices may be made available to social workers through the use of mundane technologies.

2. How do vulnerable unemployed clients manage their identity dilemma of performing both agency and vulnerability in digitalised job centres?

Article two explores the interviews with vulnerable clients and examines their identity talk techniques. This study demonstrates that clients perform agentic vulnerability, which combines the contrasting needs of performing both agentic and vulnerable identity positions within job centres. It also illustrates how clients may respond to the digital demands of the job centre through subtle forms of resistance.

3. What role does phone mediation play in the role performances of social workers and vulnerable clients in mediated welfare encounters?

Drawing on interviews with social workers and clients, article three examines role performances of clients and social workers in welfare encounters via phone calls in which non-verbal communication is absent. The study discusses how phone mediation may visualise the consequentiality embedded in welfare encounters that hold certain stakes for the social workers and clients; these stakes are often taken for granted in face-to-face welfare encounters owing to their routinised character. The findings also suggest that phone mediation may be beneficial in working with some clients, whom social workers perceive as hard-to-reach. However, the study mainly demonstrates that removing non-verbal communication presents challenges to the social worker-client relationship, welfare delivery, clients' lives and their sense of security.

For this thesis, it is key to understand how digitalisation and technology, social workers, and vulnerable clients are defined.

Defining 'digitalisation' and 'technology'

In this thesis, 'digitalisation' implies using digital technology to change, restructure, and reshape organisational work practices through, for example, administrative systems, digital client records, and digital applications (Steiner, 2021: 3359; Plesner and Husted, 2020: 5,16). The digitalisation

of the public sector is both celebrated for its opportunities and critiqued for its challenges and disadvantages (Plesner and Husted, 2020: 16; Steiner, 2021). For instance, there are concerns about whether the digitalisation of welfare provision may perpetuate existing forms of social exclusion by pushing those unable to navigate digital solutions to further exclusion (Schou and Pors, 2019). Scholars have also investigated the implications of digitalisation for public service professionals and how social work practices change with digital technology (Breit et al., 2021). Research also suggests that the opportunities and risks of digitalisation appear simultaneously and must be researched as such (Steiner, 2021; Nordesjö et al., 2022).

Within studies of digitalisation, researchers apply various perspectives to digital 'technology'. I understand this term from the perspective of social constructivism. A social constructivist view of technology emphasises that social factors shape technology, which is always embedded in a discursive context (Plesner and Husted, 2020: 61ff). This thesis understands technology as being made by humans, and that its use and function are influenced by the social, cultural, and political conditions, relations, and interactions within which it is embedded. In turn, technology can also shape the social life in which one participates (Nordesjö et al., 2022). This definition follows the field of digital sociology (Fussey and Roth, 2020; Lupton, 2015) and emphasises the duality of how technology shapes and is shaped by social life. Using this definition, I delineate myself from a determinist view of technology, which advocates technology as determining human actions and social life, and perspectives that investigate technology as a nonhuman actor within a social network of actants. Digital technologies encompass an array of devices, tools, media, etc. (Lupton, 2015: 12); therefore, it is necessary to delineate the types of mundane digital technologies that are the focus of this thesis.

The mundane technologies in focus are information and communication technologies (ICTs). ICTs are structures that allow people to collect, share, store, and communicate information quickly and efficiently (Gillingham, 2013; Golding, 2000; López Peláez et al., 2018). ICTs represent a range of tools and media, including devices and their software, such as the Internet, applications, and social media (López Peláez et al., 2018: 814). These technologies have become ubiquitous in society because of their rapid expansion and integration into everyday routines and activities (Golding, 2000; Lupton, 2015). In this thesis, such technologies include administrative systems, client records, mobile phones, and simple digital tools which permeate the daily activities of social workers and vulnerable clients within job centres.

Specifically, article one considers social workers' use of the digital CV tool, which is a system that collects and records client information. Article two considers clients' responses to ICTs in contact with job centres. Article three considers the use of mobile phones to conduct welfare encounters between social workers and clients.

Defining 'social workers' and 'vulnerable clients'

The definitions of social workers and vulnerable clients are based on the symbolic interactionist studies of social problems and troubled identities (i.e. Gubrium and Holstein, 2001; Järvinen and Mik-Meyer, 2004; Loseke, 2001). Being enrolled in a welfare organisation creates troubled identities because of their deviation from the established norms of society; such organisations identify and manage problems of societal concern, such as unemployment, and construct serviceable problems (Goffman, 1990; Gubrium and Holstein, 2001; Gubrium and Järvinen, 2014). In welfare organisations, social workers are tasked with evaluating, influencing, changing, and managing the behaviour of troubled identities (Järvinen and Mik-Meyer, 2004). When a serviceable problem is created, the individual becomes a client, receiving a given welfare service (Gubrium and Järvinen, 2014). Within this organisational context, mundane technologies are integrated into the management of serviceable social problems through social work.

'Social workers', in this thesis, are those professionals who work with clients on their serviceable social problem, in this case unemployment, in a Danish job centre. The social workers employed at the job centre attend to a range of issues surrounding the client's case and have regular meetings every third month or more, depending on the needs of the client (Caswell, 2020). Because of the formal separation between labour efforts and social service measures in Denmark (Breidahl and Seemann, 2009), job centre professionals are not necessarily trained social workers and can have other educational backgrounds. They might oversee specific parts of a client's case, such as working closely and intensively with a client in the capacity of a mentor or following the client closely in the process of work placement, thus occupying a job consultant role (Caswell, 2020). With this definition, I follow Mik-Meyer (2017) and the International Federation of Social Workers (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014) by focusing on the work social workers *do* with vulnerable clients, rather than on their educational training or legislative

authority. This allows me to foreground the ideas and practices of social work with vulnerable clients.

By 'vulnerable clients', I refer to long-term unemployed people enrolled at the job centre who experience problems in addition to their unemployment; these can entail social, mental, and physical challenges (Benjaminsen et al., 2018; Danneris, 2018). Long-term unemployment is defined as unemployment for at least six months (Denmark Statistics, 2020). In the empirical work of this thesis, the long-term unemployment rate ranges from six months to 25 years. This thesis seeks to foreground the everyday settings of clienthood. Therefore, it is less critical which type of benefit unemployed clients receive, as this can vary according to how they are categorised and re-categorised. Common to these clients is their vulnerability, in the sense that they experience problems in addition to unemployment, often multiple problems, and are long-term unemployed.

Structure of the thesis

This thesis is divided into two sections. Part One comprises six chapters, including this introduction (Chapter 1). Chapter 2 introduces state-of-the-art research on welfare encounters, the roles of social workers and clients, and the use of ICTs in welfare services. This includes self-service solutions, information systems, and communication devices used to conduct welfare encounters. Chapter 3 explains the theoretical framework of this thesis, comprising symbolic interactionism and selected Goffmanian concepts. Chapter 4 introduces the research context and briefly explains the political ambitions for the digitalised public sector in Denmark, the employment area, and job centres. Chapter 5 presents the methodological approach of the study, which builds on constructivist grounded theory. This chapter includes a detailed description of data collection and analysis, methodological reflections, and considerations of ethics and validity. Chapter 6 summarises the three articles of this thesis in short resumés, presents a discussion of the three articles, and ends with a conclusion on the thesis. This final chapter also includes reflections on the limitations of the research and suggestions for further research.

Part Two presents the three articles of this dissertation. These can be read separately from Part One. Part Two concludes with a reference list for Part One and appendices including interview guides, letters of invitation for interviews, coding examples, and a transcription key.

'[W]hat is done about outside complaints – in particular, when and how the troubleshooter intervenes, if that happens – defines and organizes the trouble. The intervention, then, may fundamentally shape what the trouble will become.'

Emerson, R.M. and Messinger, S.L. in *'The Micro-Politics of Trouble'* (1977: 128)

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Inspired by Emerson and Messinger's introductory quote, this thesis is concerned with how mundane technologies take part in the 'how' of defining, organising, and shaping the 'trouble', that is the serviceable social problem of the client. Existing research provides valuable and rich explanations of how the 'troubleshooter' - the social worker - addresses the client's 'trouble' and how the client responds to this process. Currently, such explorations include the involvement of mundane technologies such as client record systems, mobile phones, and information systems. This thesis contributes to this line of research.

The chapter begins by introducing the roles of social workers and clients in welfare encounters, including their opportunities for everyday resistance. The welfare encounter is traditionally conducted face-to-face and is a place of negotiation and organisation of the serviceable problem, which holds certain expectations for the role of the social worker as a professional and the citizen as a client (Gubrium and Järvinen, 2014). This chapter also introduces relevant bodies of literature that investigate the integration and use of mundane technologies in welfare encounters, focusing on information and communication technologies (ICTs), and how such technologies support and challenge social work and the processes of clienthood.

The social worker in the welfare encounter

As a profession, social work attends to both caring for clients and controlling through rules, laws, and regulations for social work practice (Parton, 2008). There is also a high demand for administrative and documentation practices in the social work profession (De Witte et al., 2016). Working with vulnerable clients, social workers must juggle that people in marginalised positions are constrained by legal, sociopolitical, cultural, and economic conditions, but are also capable of exercising agency (Lister, 1998: 6). Thus, the relationship between the social worker as a representative of the welfare service and the client is defined by an unequal power relationship favouring the social worker (Järvinen, 2001; Mäkitalo, 2006). Some of the primary purposes of social work are to build a relationship with the client (De Witte et al., 2016) and translate the client's problem into a serviceable case which makes the client eligible for a given welfare service (Järvinen and Mik-Meyer, 2004). Social workers increasingly occupy the role of facilitator, which emphasises the individualisation of clients' responsibility for their self-development, limiting social workers' abilities and opportunities to engage with the narrative of clients' problems (Järvinen and Mik-Meyer 2012). In welfare work, social workers occupy multiple roles and juggle the interests of clients and the systemic demands. This task may include the use of discretion to interpret conflicting organisational goals, reconcile policy demands, and work with clients (De Witte et al., 2016; Evans, 2011). Social workers may find themselves in positions where they prioritise client interests (Järvinen and Mik-Meyer, 2012) by opposing systemic rules and regulations (Strier and Breshtling, 2016). Scholars have examined actions that oppose existing rules and regulations of social work as professional, everyday acts of resistance (Carey and Foster, 2011; Feldman, 2022; Strier and Breshtling, 2016). This discussion is key to this thesis.

Social workers' everyday acts of resistance have been conceptualised using terms such as rogue social workers (Weinberg and Banks, 2019), deviant social work (Carey and Foster, 2011), and disruptive social work (Feldman, 2022). Such terms pinpoint how social workers manage contrasting demands, reshape practices, and bend rules and regulations to secure the quality of work and welfare and to benefit their clients (Carey and Foster, 2011; Feldman, 2022; Weinberg and Banks, 2019).

For instance, Carey and Foster (2011:578) define deviant social work as small acts of resistance, deception, or even sabotage. These acts include spending more time on clients than assigned, exaggerating client needs to ensure appropriate help, confronting management, and reluctant use

of punitive practices such as economic sanctioning (Carey and Foster, 2011). Deviant social work practices are valued positively if they benefit clients (Carey and Foster, 2011). Weinberg and Banks (2019: 372) define rogue social work through social workers' responses to challenges in their work practices arising from organisational pressures, regulation of practice, and scarce resources. They define social workers' everyday resistance as acts that refuse or subvert prescribed practices, prioritise service over short-term solutions, and bend rules that contradict their ideals of practice (Weinberg and Banks, 2019). For instance, a social worker may refuse to take on specific tasks requested by a manager in order to conduct what the social worker perceives as ethically right in the given situation, for example, prioritising the relationship with the client at the expense of detailed documentation. Finally, in his study of disruptive social work, Feldman (2022: 760) focuses on collective expressions of resistance towards authorities in order to support vulnerable clients and avoid measures that worsen social workers' working conditions.

The concept of professional resistance in social work requires further empirical examination and theoretical development (Carey and Foster, 2011; Strier and Breshtling, 2016). My work includes examples of professionals' everyday acts of resistance in social workers' use of mundane digital tools. In article one, I utilise Goffman's theoretical concept of expression games to demonstrate how social workers can resist established rules and procedures to benefit the most vulnerable clients by avoiding and adapting the use of the digital CV tool.

However, in a welfare encounter, the social worker is not alone in experiencing contrasting demands and dilemmas. Clients are also expected to act and conduct themselves in certain ways, which may lead to identity dilemmas and even resistance.

The client in the welfare encounter

Clients are encouraged to make sense of their problems according to the welfare organisation in which they are enrolled, which offers them certain organisationally formed identities (Gubrium and Holstein, 2001; Mik-Meyer and Silverman, 2019) and comprises a process of clientisation (Gubrium and Järvinen, 2014). In this setting, clients negotiate their roles in response to the expectations of their positions as clients. However, these expectations may be contradictory. On the one hand, clients are expected to exhibit agency by acting responsibly, independently, and actively in their cases (Larsen and Caswell, 2022; Mik-Meyer and Haugaard, 2021); on the other

hand, they are expected to display vulnerability in order to be eligible for welfare benefits (Mitchell, 2020). In response to these demands of clienthood, clients engage in identity work to reconcile their private and socially attributed identity positions (Gubrium and Holstein, 2001; Goffman, 1972; Snow and Anderson, 1987). In this process, identity dilemmas may emerge when clients' thoughts about their problems, identities, wishes, and perceptions of the help they need diverge from those of the public service in which they are enrolled as clients.

Identity dilemmas have been researched in symbolic interactionist studies as the attempt to maintain lost, positively acknowledged identities and reconcile new identity positions (Charmaz, 1994). This process may include the use of neutralisation (or accounting) techniques (Scott and Lyman, 1968; Sykes and Matza, 1957) and the negotiation of both vulnerable and agentic positions (e.g. Cuthill, 2017; Dunn, 2005; Leisenring, 2006; Mitchell, 2020; Solberg, 2011). However, claiming a vulnerable identity position through, for instance, the victim narrative may create problematic outcomes for retaining personal agency (Wagner et al., 2017). Investigating identity dilemmas, Dunn and Creek (2015: 264) show that in the attempt to reconcile conflicting demands of situations for exhibiting both victimisation and agency, people may attain a 'blended identity' which combines devalued and valued identity positions. Agency can be negotiated through a survivor identity that distances the individual from the stigma of being a victim, whereas the victim narrative exhibits vulnerability and the use of accounting strategies (Dunn and Creek, 2015). Focusing on how vulnerable clients exhibit vulnerability, Mitchell (2020) contends that as welfare policy is increasingly conditioned on fulfilling requirements and sanctioning failure to do so, vulnerable clients find themselves in insecure and unstable life conditions. In response, clients may adopt agentic strategies to perform vulnerability and prove their eligibility for welfare benefits (Mitchell, 2020).

Research also shows that vulnerable clients can reject and resist organisationally offered identities that contradict their personal stories (Gonyea and Melekis, 2017; Loseke, 2001; Caswell et al., 2013) and engage in collaborative agentic practices with professionals on their cases (Mik-Meyer and Haugaard, 2021). Caswell et al. (2013) found that unemployed clients can exhibit agency by resisting, protesting, and avoiding institutionally offered identities in interactions with professionals. However, resisting institutionally offered identities can come at a cost for clients in terms of proving their eligibility to receive public benefits (Caswell et al., 2013). Taking up the concept of resilience, Cuthill (2017) shows that asylum seekers resist the institutionally offered identities of 'asylum seeker' and actively construct personal identities to achieve internal and

social recognition. Studying homeless shelters, Mik-Meyer and Hauggaard (2021) found that clients and professionals may work collaboratively to solve the client's problems and reach organisational goals. In this pursuit, a form of hybrid resistance through collaborative agency is possible, which can be an expression of both resistance towards and compliance with organisational requirements and norms (Mik-Meyer and Haugaard, 2021).

This thesis includes an analysis of how clients may negotiate their identities in welfare organisations in response to the contrasting demands of exhibiting both agency and vulnerability, and how they may exhibit resistive stances. In article two, my co-author and I show that vulnerable clients may reconcile their identity dilemmas through the expression of agentic vulnerability, which combines the performance of both agentic and vulnerable stances. For instance, clients may use hero-talk to exonerate their stigmatised unemployed positions by emphasising their previous hard-working lives. They may also utilise the verbal technique of victim-talk to emphasise vulnerability by referring to tragedy and sickness, which casts them as unable to work or take on ordinary employment. Finally, they may use the resister-talk technique in response to the digital requirements of the job centre. This last technique represents clients' subtle resistive stances through collaborative compliance as well as refusing, and neglecting to respond to the digital requirements of the job centre. Thus, they disengage and distance themselves from their unemployed identities.

As the resister-talk technique suggests, processes of clienthood as well as the social workers' professional role and everyday acts of resistance occur in a welfare encounter that is increasingly permeated by mundane technologies, which in this thesis are ICTs.

Information and Communication Technologies and the welfare encounter

ICTs bring about different challenges, tensions, opportunities, and risks in social work practices (López Peláez et al., 2018). For instance, ICTs can promote transparency in social work but also lead to problems such as new types of social exclusion mechanisms and client surveillance (Løberg and Egeland, 2023; Parton, 2008; Steiner, 2021; De Witte et al., 2016). Social workers may have to adjust their coping responses and strategies regarding their work (Breit et al., 2021; Ylvisaker and Rugkåsa, 2022), their sanctioning practices (Torsvik et al., 2022; Vilhena, 2021;

Wright et al., 2020), and their ways of interacting with and responding to the implementation of new technologies (Burton and van den Broek, 2009; Gillingham, 2013, 2015, 2018, 2021). Social workers may also experience different or new emotional labour (Løberg and Egeland, 2023) and changes to the social worker–client relationship (Nordesjö et al., 2022) as a result of integrating ICTs into their work practice. Research points to how the adoption of ICTs in social work brings forward the inextricability of both the challenges and opportunities of digital technology (Steiner, 2021). Zhu and Andersen (2021) argue that digital technology and tools can contribute positively to social work but cannot be applied similarly to all client groups.

For vulnerable clients, the integration of ICTs into public services may result in exclusionary practices. Such exclusionary practices have been researched under the term 'the digital divide', which describes the inequalities caused by unequal access to and differentiated skills in using ICTs and the Internet (Robinson et al., 2015; van Deursen and van Dijk, 2011; Willis and Tranter, 2006). Research shows that such inequalities may give rise to information poverty (Facer and Furlong, 2001), creating a digital underclass of Internet non-users, predominantly socioeconomically disadvantaged people (Helsper and Reisdorf, 2017). Research also suggests that marginalised citizen groups are more vulnerable to digital exclusion (Eubanks, 2018; Helsper and Reisdorf, 2017; Ragnedda et al., 2022; Schou and Pors, 2019). In this vein, research discussions have emerged on marginalisation and barriers to social participation for disadvantaged groups (Schou and Pors, 2019; Taylor et al., 2018) and digital literacy (Choi, 2016; Couldry et al., 2014; Watling and Crawford, 2010). Scholars argue that studying digital inequality must encompass the interplay of disadvantages in both the digital and non-digital aspects of social life because social and digital inequalities are increasingly inextricable (Ragnedda et al., 2022; Robinson et al., 2015). Research reveals that the integration of ICTs in public services implies changes in clienthood and clients' interactions with public services and professionals (Lindgren et al., 2019; Madsen et al., 2022; Pors and Pallesen, 2021).

Recent research has called for approaches that investigate the micro-level processes of ICT use in welfare encounters, focusing on everyday practices in public services and the social worker–client relationship (Lindgren et al., 2019; Madsen et al., 2022; Nordesjö et al., 2022; Pors and Schou, 2021). ICTs support and challenge social work practices, while adding another layer to the conditions within which vulnerable clients meet social workers and are defined as clients. One way in which ICTs have been introduced into welfare provision is through self-service solutions.

Self-service solutions for clients

Self-service solutions include applying for benefits online, attending to digital mail, and filling out various forms, etc. Self-service solutions harbour the expectation that citizens can learn how to navigate digital platforms, which has been discussed in the literature as the assumption that citizens are digital by default (Helsper, 2011; Pors and Schou, 2021; Wright et al., 2020). Such discussions have given rise to research on citizenship through digital means which contemplates citizens' opportunities to digitally access a wide range of civic activities and digital participation in society (Choi, 2016; Couldry et al., 2014; Mossberger et al., 2017; Schou and Hjelholt, 2018). In welfare services, self-services presuppose clients' engagement with digital requirements through which clients are expected to become self-reliant (Pors and Schou, 2021).

In a Danish study on digitalised welfare provision, Schou and Pors (2019) found that mandatory digital self-service solutions presuppose agentic engagement with digital services and assume digital competency. They show that existing inequalities are reinforced and new inequalities are produced by the digitalisation of welfare provisions because those already marginalised do not have the necessary capabilities to navigate the mandatory self-service solutions. Studying the administrative work produced by digital technology, Madsen et al. (2022) argue that the integration of self-service solutions displaces responsibilities and work tasks from professionals to clients, creating an administrative burden for clients which was previously managed by social workers. Such displacement places a high demand on clients' digital competencies and adds an administrative burden to being a client, which risks exacerbating existing social inequalities (Madsen et al., 2022). Madsen et al. (2022) argue that the administrative burden is consequential for clients as their access to public services depends on their skills and abilities to sufficiently engage with digital platforms, such as remembering deadlines and being able to figure out the online application process.

According to recent research, examinations of mandatory self-service solutions require further development (Madsen et al., 2022; Pors and Schou, 2021), particularly regarding the implications of self-service solutions for everyday interactions between clients and social workers (Lindgren et al., 2019; Pors and Pallesen, 2021). Research also calls for the perspective of vulnerable clients in public services and their engagement with mundane technologies to be developed in future studies (Madsen et al., 2022; Nordesjö et al., 2021; Robinson, 2018). This thesis takes the perspective of clients to investigate their negotiations of clienthood which were shown to intertwine with the digital requirements and demands of the job centre, such as self-service

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solutions. The analysis in article two explores clients' identity work in digitalised job centres. One identity work strategy showed that clients neglected or refused to comply with self-service solutions or displayed agentic engagement by attempting to take on all the work to satisfy the digital requirements of the job centre.

Another way in which ICTs are integrated into the welfare encounter is through information systems that support social workers' documentation practices.

Information systems in social work

Information systems help social workers to store and record knowledge about their clients. Research has revealed that the use of information systems changes the type of information and knowledge recorded and selected for documentation purposes in social work practice (Gillingham, 2013, 2015; Huuskonen and Vakkari, 2015; Parton, 2008). A key discussion in the literature on recording and storing information in social work contemplates that using information systems produces detailed informational descriptions about clients, but risks overlooking social and narrative information about clients' circumstances (Gillingham, 2013; Parton, 2008; Steyaert and Gould, 2009). Hence, such research discussions suggest that social work practice is increasingly focused on recording detailed but surface information instead of valuing the depth of social and narrative information (Parton, 2008).

Burton and van den Broek (2009) found that using information systems in social work practice may create tension between professional values and bureaucratic ideals of accountability. For example, they found that the introduction of technologies to accomplish administrative tasks refocused social work to emphasise bureaucratic accountability ideals rather than tasks such as supporting clients, which are considered a core part of social work professionalism. Such changes affected the social workers' use of discretion in, for instance, case recording (Burton and Van Den Broek, 2009). In her study of digital client representations in information systems, Løberg (2023) showed that social workers may reconstruct and reassemble clients' narrative information after it has been fragmented into descriptions fit for the information systems. In a study on social workers' selection of recorded information, Huuskonen and Vakkari (2015) found that social workers make both intentional and unintentional selections regarding which information to store and record about clients. Intentional selections relied on social workers' perceptions of clients' societal contexts. Unintentional selections were caused by constrained everyday work realities, such as

occupying multiple roles simultaneously in welfare encounters—that is, the roles of listener, notetaker, and moderator of the conversation. Such selections of recorded knowledge jointly generate client stories (Huuskonen and Vakkari, 2015). Furthermore, de Witte et al. (2016) found that social workers may make strategic and moral decisions when using information systems, thus influencing what information is recorded and shared. They also found that when information systems strain social workers' practices, they may develop strategies to preserve their perceptions of their professional roles and the relational and narrative approach with clients (De Witte et al., 2016).

Previous research emphasises the need to further investigate social workers' use of information systems, particularly when working with vulnerable clients (Christensen et al., 2022; Høybye-Mortensen, 2015; Løberg, 2021; Tummers and Rocco, 2015). In this thesis, I show that social workers may make strategic choices in their use of information systems and the information such technologies record and collect; such choices vary according to discrete client groups as per social workers' perception. This is illustrated in article one, which takes an empirical departure by examining social workers' use of the digital CV tool. Here, I find that social workers may use the collected information about their clients strategically to test their expressed vulnerabilities, rework their attitudes towards the labour market, or avoid and adapt the use of the digital tool to benefit the clients they perceive as the most vulnerable.

In recent years, ICTs have also been used to conduct welfare encounters through communication devices such as phones and video calls, which have various implications for social work practices.

Welfare encounters via communication devices

Using ICTs, such as phones, e-mail, and chats, to conduct welfare encounters introduces changes, challenges, and opportunities for interaction with clients and social workers' practices (Fiorentino et al., 2023; Pink et al., 2022; Räsänen, 2015; Simpson, 2017). Welfare encounters conducted via digital devices can induce changes in the power dynamics between clients and social workers, risk alienating certain client groups (Breit et al., 2021), and blur the boundaries between work and home, creating role ambiguity (Berkowsky, 2013). Welfare encounters conducted through a communication device can be termed mediated interactions (e.g. Thompson, 2020; Rettie, 2009; Cetina, 2009). A mediated interaction can occur synchronously in time, for example, through a phone call, or asynchronously through texts or e-mail (Rettie, 2009).

Mediated encounters may produce specific patient, client, or social worker identities (Phillips, 2019) and distance between social workers and clients (Räsänen, 2015), leading to interactional trouble (Olsen and Oltedal, 2022). Pink et al. (2022) found that it can be valuable for social work to feature mediated encounters as part of social work practice, although such interactions cannot fully replace face-to-face encounters with clients. They argue that the increased use of communication devices to conduct welfare encounters has been spurred on by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has accelerated the use of video calls and digital interactive practices with clients. However, studies have shown that although a range of digital service solutions and communication with public services are available, traditional ways of communicating, for instance, via phones, are still preferred for more difficult conversations (Ebbers et al., 2016; Madsen et al., 2022; Tangi et al., 2021). Research indicates that simple phone technology remains a widely used conversation medium for clients in contact with service professionals (Ebbers et al., 2016). A similar pattern was observed in this thesis. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, welfare encounters were moved entirely to digital means and conducted using a phone or video call on a computer. Vulnerable clients preferred to use phones without the camera function to conduct welfare encounters with social workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, even though video calls were possible. In article three, I explore what this mediation meant for the welfare encounter between social workers and clients and show how they explained their role performances in encounters where visual cues of interaction were missing. This analysis was inspired by previous studies that examined what happens when a welfare encounter, traditionally face-to-face, is conducted via communication devices.

One key line of research investigating mediated encounters shows how mediated communication through digital channels, such as chats, texts, online platforms, Skype, phones, and e-mail, can bring opportunities and challenges to the social worker–client relationship (Breit et al., 2021; Løberg and Egeland, 2023; Madsen et al., 2022). For instance, Løberg and Egeland (2023) examined text-based interactions through an online platform between social workers and clients. They found that this kind of mediated interaction can strain social workers emotionally, but also provide benefits, for example, to the social worker–client relationship through increased availability and informal talk, as well as leading to more efficient and cost-effective work (Løberg and Egeland, 2023). They also argued that emotions can become a resource in mediated interactions because social workers can use such interactions to gain clients' trust, obtain necessary information, and increase compliance through different kinds of emotional exchanges

(Løberg and Egeland, 2023: 11). Research also shows that text-based communication (i.e. SMS, messenger, chat) with clients may spur the demand for services, as social workers appear more available for interaction owing to the use of everyday communication devices for formal welfare encounters (Breit et al., 2021; Christensen et al., 2022; Løberg, 2021; Madsen et al., 2022). In a study of social workers' coping responses, Breit et al. (2021) found that mediated encounters foster closer relationships with clients, new forms of availability, and the co-production of services which can empower some clients while alienating others. Similarly, Christensen et al. (2022) found that digital communication causes clients to take for granted the ability to contact their social workers at any time of day. They also revealed that digital communication in social work can result in ethical dilemmas and limited access to sensory and bodily cues such as eye contact but can also create positive outcomes such as building relationships with hard-to-reach clients (Christensen et al., 2022). In this thesis, similar patterns were found in phone-mediated encounters. Article three shows how social workers and clients spontaneously remarked on the importance of non-verbal communication in welfare encounters and how they lacked these in mediated encouners. The article also shows that the phone-mediation may provide a confidential distance for some clients and flexibility in social workers' workday.

Another key line of research in this thesis is the lack of sensory experience in mediated interactions. Social work that integrates communicative technology may place excessive physical and mental strain on social workers, as they must work in new ways to compensate for the lack of sensory experience (Kong et al., 2022). In a recent Danish study on job centres, Flügge and Møller (2023) emphasise the importance of non-verbal physical cues in assessing clients' needs and the necessity for finding new ways of assessing clients that do not rely on non-verbal communication. Other scholars emphasise that while digital social work practice can be demanding and restrictive, it can also enable the production of collaborative structures and offer new possibilities and opportunities to work with clients (Fiorentino et al., 2023; Kong et al., 2022). In a Finnish study, Fiorentino et al. (2022) explored social workers' experiences of mediated interactions and noted the importance of reflecting on feelings, detecting moods, and seeing clients' faces. They pinpoint that gestures, intuition, and visual expressions promote the social worker–client relationship in face-to-face encounters, and the absence of such sensory cues can have negative consequences and lead to misunderstandings in mediated encounters (Fiorentino et al., 2022:12f). Fiorentino et al. (2022) found that social workers may find new ways to compensate for the lack of such sensory cues by, for example, offering descriptions of their appearance or establishing new practices that

rely on language. They also briefly noted that mediated interaction might make the relationship between social workers and clients more equal (Fiorentino et al., 2022:11).

In studying mediated interactions, research contends that marginalised people with various vulnerabilities appear to be under-researched (Johannessen, 2023). Research also calls for more engagement with mundane technologies such as phones (Mullan and Wajcman, 2019). Further research should be encouraged to examine how a lack of sensory experience is managed in mediated welfare encounters (Christensen et al., 2022; Fiorentino et al., 2023; Flügge and Møller, 2023; Kong et al., 2022).

My work includes both social workers' and clients' perspectives and utilises an interactionist Goffmanian framework to understand how social workers and clients present themselves in welfare encounters where sensory cues of interaction are limited. Article three shows that phone mediation can provide a confidential distance between social workers and clients, which, for some clients, can make it easier to participate in welfare encounters. The analysis of article three also demonstrates that mediated welfare encounters might provide opportunities for renegotiation of the power dynamics within welfare encounters that challenge the authority of social workers. However, missing visual cues of interaction, such as eye contact and bodily gestures, can restrict social workers' and clients' role performances. The study shows that phone mediation can visualise what is at stake for social workers and clients in welfare encounters. For social workers, their professional work role and organisational goal attainment are at stake. For vulnerable clients, the welfare encounter governs their social and economic security. Thus, the study argues that phone mediation can visualise these stakes, which are often taken for granted in routinised face-to-face welfare encounters.

'I assume that when individuals attend to any current situation, they face the question 'What is going on here?' whether asked explicitly as in times of confusion and doubt or tacitly, during occasions of usual certitude, the question is put and the answer to it is presumed by the way individuals then proceed to get on with the affairs at hand.'

Erving Goffman in *Frame Analysis* (1986:8)

Chapter 3: Theoretical framework

The theoretical point of departure for this thesis is symbolic interactionism. Being one of the most influential voices within symbolic interactionism, Erving Goffman and his work on interaction has been the core theoretical inspiration for my thesis, questioning 'what is going on' in social workers' and clients' routine engagements with mundane technologies. Goffman's (e.g. 1967, 1969, 1986) micro-sociological development of symbolic interactionism allows me to explore the social identities, conversational frames, and interactions that vulnerable clients and social workers sustain, maintain, and present in a given context. As I developed my project, the focus on mundane technologies became clearer, accentuating the importance of the everyday and the way the social actors proceed with the 'affairs at hand'. To this end, the Goffmanian scholarly tradition provides the necessary theoretical tools and concepts for understanding 'what is going on'.

My sociological thinking and approach have been inspired by multiple researchers with symbolic interactionist perspectives. For instance, the work on the institutional identities of clients and social workers (Järvinen and Mik-Mik-Meyer, 2004, 2012; Mik-Meyer, 2017) and institutional selves (Gubrium and Holstein, 2001; Gubrium and Järvinen, 2014) has been a significant inspiration for this research and my own scholarly development. Furthermore, recent academic work on the processes of identity construction that emphasises what people do not do or accomplish (Scott, 2019, 2020) has also provided inspiration.

This chapter begins by introducing the symbolic interactionist perspective of the thesis, focusing especially on the Goffmanian perspective. The subsequent three subsections develop the specific theoretical concepts utilised for the analysis in each of the three articles: 1) strategic interaction, 2) identity work, and 3) frame and retrospective fatefulness.

The symbolic interactionist perspective

The symbolic interactionist perspective emphasises socially constructed processes enacted within specific societal norms for behavioural, cultural, and situational contexts. It views people as active agents in their everyday worlds and social life as emergent through the continuous construction and reconstruction of social structures (Järvinen, 2020). This perspective is useful because it can motivate a focus on how the interactive, social, and everyday practices of social workers and vulnerable clients are supported, produced, and reproduced by the use of mundane technologies.

Returning to the roots of the tradition, the basic premise of symbolic interactionism assumes that individual interpretations and meanings are negotiated through ongoing interactions; hence, social interaction is a symbolic process that forms human conduct (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1967). Blumer's (1969: 2ff) three premises for symbolic interactionism state that: 1) people act towards physical, psychological, and social things based on their ascribed meanings; 2) meaning arises and is recreated through interaction; and 3) meaning is subject to interpretation and is not a socially determined process. This implies that identity is a socially constructed and negotiated process, a product of social experience, action, and relations with other people (Mead, 1967: 135). People's choices, actions, and interactions are always directed towards the internalised social norms of a specific cultural, situational, and societal context (Mead, 1967: 154f). Thus, the key to symbolic interactionism is focusing on meaning, interpretation, and action.

The study of the categorisation of individuals in welfare services is often inspired by the symbolic interactionist tradition (Mik-Meyer, 2017: 42), which is specifically suitable for examining the relationship between individuals' actions and their situational contexts. From the symbolic interactionist perspective, the job centre's focus on managing unemployment can be understood as a process of social categorisation of a given social problem (Becker, 1963). Socially problematic behaviour is defined as behaviour that violates the moral norms and regulations of a society and substantiates a perceived threat to the moral codes, rules, and norms of that society

(Becker, 1963; Goode, 2015). The person experiencing a social problem finds themselves in the position of having acquired a stigma, a blemish of character, and a discounting personal attribute that sets them apart from established and negotiated societal norms (Goffman, 1990: 14). Unemployment may be considered one such stigmatising blemish of character that threatens to discredit the actors (Goffman, 1990). Defining something, someone, or a behaviour as deviant comprises the process of everyday interaction, interpretation, and reaction (Conyers and Calhoun, 2015). Thus, the societal reaction towards people's unemployment constitutes it as a social problem and a stigma that should be managed within the job centre.

From this perspective, social workers and clients define themselves according to the roles, statuses, relationships, and identities available and expected within the situation (Mik-Meyer, 2017: 44). Such situational expectations are framed by policy, legal regulations, and societal norms and are not fixed entities; they develop and change over time. Thus, understanding what it means to be unemployed and how an unemployed client and social worker should act varies over time and according to the given context. From this perspective, agency can be understood as a way of making one's definition of the situation the dominant one; through agency, clients and social workers create, interpret, manipulate, and react to their situational conditions (Mik-Meyer, 2017: 28,45). Exercising agency demands a specific performance in Goffman's sense.

Goffman took inspiration from dramaturgical analysis, which builds on the metaphor of a theatre and views social behaviour as a drama containing a scene, props, performances, audiences, roles, settings, and so on (Edgley, 2013). A dramaturgical performance, then, is the presentation of a consistent image of the self – that is 'face' – and maintenance of a pattern of verbal and non-verbal acts – that is 'line' (Goffman, 1967: 5f). Such an analysis emphasises how social actors control their situations, interactions, and self-presentations, and fit their line of activity to their understanding of the given situation. All interactions occur within certain frames. A frame organises meaning and involvement, structures experience, and makes it possible for actors to understand what is going on in a particular situation, thus making interactions and activities meaningful (Goffman, 1986: 24ff). A focused interaction follows the main line of activity and consigns side involvements outside the purview of the established structure of the frame (Goffman, 1986: 210,345). The frame holds normative expectations for individual performances (Goffman, 1986: 345). An individual claims a certain role through a social role performance, comprising acts which meet the normative demands of a certain situation. A person becomes committed to a role they perform regularly (Goffman, 1972: 79); for example, being a long-term

unemployed client entails having performed the role of a client regularly, and being a social worker implies a regular performance of a certain professional role. Thus, welfare encounters provide dramaturgical conditions for the performances of particular social worker and client roles available and normatively expected in situations in which the actors will attempt to fit their activities and disattend from side involvements. Their activities and interactions make sense according to the frame that structures their experience.

Part of Goffman's (1969) scholarship addresses social actors' strategic interactive choices, focusing on the role of information in interactions. In the welfare organisational context, I found that this framework was especially suitable for explaining what is going on when social workers use the digital CV tool.

Strategic interaction and expression games

Goffman (1969) examined people's strategic interactive choices through the term 'expression games', which constitute a common part of everyday situations. The notion of expression games emanates from game-theory ideas, and concerns moves between two parties in pursuit of obtaining certain information (Goffman, 1969). Strategic interaction depicts mutual attempts to convince the other party of one's self-representation; people make moves in conversations to convince the other party of one's desired appearance (Goffman, 1969). In such interactions, information is strategic when people test the self-presentation of the other party if they detect that not all relevant information has been revealed (Brensinger and Eyal, 2021; Goffman, 1969).

Expression games consist of moves and countermoves. One of the key moves is the *control move*. Through the control move, the individual attempts to improve or control what is expressed about themselves, through which the individual tries to present a certain appearance to the observing party and control the expressed information (Goffman, 1969: 12). Such a move may involve verbal repairs, accounts, and justifications for disclosed information (Goffman, 1969: 12f). Another key move is the *uncovering move.* If the observing party becomes suspicious that not all relevant information has been disclosed, they may engage in the uncovering move by conducting some sort of examination to reveal what is concealed (Goffman, 1969: 17f). The last key move is the *counter-uncovering move* which comprises the reaction of the concealing party as they work against the attempt to unmask what is being controlled and concealed (Goffman, 1969: 19f). In

the uncovering move, *identity tags* represent a central concept (Goffman, 1969: 23). Identity tags can be formal documents of institutionalised qualifications or informal mental recollections of past biographical events. Such identity tags either confirm the expressed information or reveal what has been concealed.

Taking the example of the digital CV tool, a digital CV comprises a person's previous work experience and existing competencies and functions as a dialogue tool for social workers to direct the conversation towards the labour market and enhance clients' employment opportunities (Danish Agency for Labor Market, 2020). In a welfare encounter, the social worker and client may engage in expression games when interacting with and discussing this digital tool. In the interaction, the digital tool becomes an identity tag, as it is a detailed digitalised informational description of the client's occupational identities. This identity tag tests the clients' expressed vulnerability. Through the control move, the client might seek to control information about themselves to present a particular personal front for the social worker. In contrast, the social worker might engage in the uncovering move to reveal undisclosed information in constructing the CV. The social worker may then use this uncovered information to strategically work with the client towards the organisational goal of the job centre, which is getting them closer to the labour market. In such instances, clients may attempt to use the counter-uncovering move to work against this revelation of sought-out information by providing other types of explanations such as social and narrative information about their lives. Working with the most vulnerable clients may reveal the unsuitability of the digital CV tool. When working with the most vulnerable clients, social workers may attempt to control the information recorded and stored about their clients; thus, they benefit their clients by resisting the demand for constructing the digital CV. Through the concept of expression games (Goffman, 1969), this thesis contributes to a theoretical understanding of what happens to social work practices when mundane technologies are used. This perspective also directs attention and appreciation towards social workers' agency in welfare situations.

When people find themselves in discreditable positions, such as unemployment, they may tell a certain story to explain their situation (Goffman, 1990: 14,133). Research into how clients fit their self-presentations to the organisational template treats such identity management through the concepts of identity work and identity talk, which I introduce next.

Identity work and identity talk techniques

Clients may use various strategies to fit their self-presentations to the organisational template of the institution in which they are enrolled. Such identity work is conditioned by the given situation and depicts the everyday identity construction of individuals who find themselves in need of reconciling multiple identity positions (Holstein and Gubrium, 2001: 11). Identity work describes clients' attempts to salvage a sense of self-worth and dignity in a vulnerable or deviant position (Snow and Anderson, 1987). One way to accomplish identity work is through identity talk techniques. Identity talk represents verbal interactional techniques in which an individual attempts to reconcile a personal identity with a socially attributed one (Snow and Anderson, 1987: 1348f). Being a client entails the expectation and availability of several identities for one's performance (Gubrium and Järvinen, 2014), which may lead to identity dilemmas that describe the attempt to reconcile lost and new identity positions (Charmaz, 1994). For unemployed clients, identity dilemmas may arise from the loss of a previous working role or the unwanted identity position of unemployment.

In Goffman's (1961) view, the process of losing a previous status (such as being employed), can lead people to tell either 'sad tales', which blame external circumstances and demonstrate regret, or 'apologias', which defend the actor's face through alignment with moral codes. This process of role distance, in which the actor seeks to disengage from a current unwanted identity position (Goffman, 1972), can also involve the use of verbal neutralisation and accounting techniques. Such techniques justify or defend one's face in an attempt to dramaturgically realign a deviant expression of the self with the normative ideals of the given society (Scott and Lyman, 1968; Sykes and Matza, 1957). Such techniques aim to justify deviant behaviour by accepting responsibility for a deviant action but denying its pejorative character, or excuse the behaviour by mitigating one's responsibility for such actions (Scott and Lyman, 1968: 47). Several developments in accounting and neutralisation techniques have been prevalent in the study of deviant behaviour and have received significant scholarly interest. In article two, my co-author and I use two of Pestello's (1991) techniques of discounting: coercion, which attributes deviant behaviour to factors outside the individual's control, and exception, which claims that deviance is an exceptional episode in their otherwise non-deviant life. In an attempt to reconcile identity dilemmas, individuals' identity talk may also concern things they did not accomplish, did not do, or paths they did not take.

Building on Goffman and other symbolic interactionist studies, the sociology of nothing (Scott, 2018, 2019, 2020) is a perspective that specifically explores social acts that amount to nothing but comprise significant parts of narrative identity construction. This symbolic interactionist perspective emphasises that identity negotiations are accompanied by events and episodes of things that did not happen, paths not taken, lost dreams and opportunities, and choosing not to do something (Scott, 2019: 3f). This perspective emphasises the negotiated interactive processes of identity construction through what people do not do, do not have, and do not become. Building on Goffman's (1972) definition of role distance, the process of disengagement from an unwanted role can exhibit subtle resistive stances through the actor's attempt to remove themselves from the situation (Scott, 2018: 13). In article two, we pay special attention to stories that disidentify with the unwanted identity of unemployment. For example, clients expressed purposefully 'doing nothing', which denotes acts of commission, such as avoidance, disengagement, refusal, or rejection (Scott, 2019: 16). Clients also expressed 'non-doing' practices, such as neglecting to act (Scott, 2019: 13,142ff). Such acts are 'omissive' (Scott, 2019: 16) and depict negligence and passive action.

The examinations of article two revealed that clients utilised three identity talk techniques of self-presentation to resolve their identity dilemmas. In their self-presentations, the clients rejected and kept a distance from the unwanted identity of being a non-worker and the potentially stigmatising effects they perceived that this identity position had. Instead, they claimed the lost, positively valued identity of a hard worker and juggled the organisationally expected identity position of being a vulnerable client. We argue that in doing so, the clients performed agentic vulnerability, which combines the contrasting performances of agency and vulnerability. Agentic vulnerability was performed through three identity talk techniques. First, clients performed the identity talk technique of the heroic self to present a hardworking identity and emphasise their agentic, active selves. Second, clients also claimed a more passive victim identity, which emphasised vulnerability, to reconcile their dilemma of needing welfare assistance. Third, they performed a resister identity position through three subtype techniques in response to the job centre's digital infrastructure of mundane technologies. The clients emphasised their identity as well-prepared clients by doing all the required digital work. This technique of 'doing something' allowed them to disguise their cynical attitudes towards the laborious design of digital requirements, such as the digital CV, which they completed but did not use. The clients also employed a technique of purposefully avoiding the use of mundane technologies of the job centre and thereby 'doing

nothing' (Scott, 2019: 16). Finally, clients also performed the passive technique of 'non-doing' (Scott 2019:16), which was accomplished by neglecting to act on digital requirements, reading mail, or otherwise act within their cases. We argue that the three techniques—hero-talk, victim-talk, and resister-talk, including the three subtypes—comprise the performance of agentic vulnerability. Hence, this article emphasises the attentiveness of a symbolic interactionist perspective to clients' agency, even in the social parts of their lives that might seem passive, negligent, and disengaging.

The dramaturgical focus of Goffmanian scholarship includes special attention to symbolic cues of interaction, such as facial mimics, bodily gestures, and eye contact. However, such cues are limited in phone-mediated interactions. What this means for identity negotiations between social workers and clients is examined in article three through the concepts of frame (Goffman, 1986), and retrospective fatefulness (Goffman, 1967).

Frame and retrospective fatefulness

Acting within a certain frame entails the pursuit of fitting one's actions to one's overall understanding of what is going on in a situation, including the implicit set of conventions, rules, and principles of that situation (Goffman, 1986: 247). In welfare organisations, certain framing rules are enforced, limiting what is possible within these situations (Goffman, 1986: xvi, 57). A frame break occurs when an actor engages in an activity that cannot be understood, ignored, or regulated within a certain frame. Hence, frame breaking is motivated by disrupting the organisation of the frame activity (Goffman, 1986: 348ff). Frame breaking can occur from improper involvement, disengagement, or leaving the interaction and frame altogether. Hereto, a person may break role, meaning to stop performing according to their role, if they think they are out of sight or deem it unimportant to maintain an appearance (Goffman, 1972: 89). In the examination of article three, I used this understanding of the frame to grasp the role performances of clients and social workers in phone-mediated welfare encounters.

Another key concept in this exploration is retrospective fatefulness derived from Goffman's concept of action. Goffman (1967) developed the concept of action to encompass chancy, consequential, and problematic social situations that are distinctly different from everyday life, which is characterised as being secure, predictable, and uneventful. There is a certain exoticness

to the way Goffman (1967: 155f,170) describes action as fateful, which is both problematic and consequential. Goffman (1967: 170) acknowledged that everyday life can contain fateful situations. Individuals may remain unaware of the chances they take in routine daily life situations as they strive for uneventful, predictable, and safe social situations. They may only redefine a situation as a fateful endeavour after a consequential and problematic event occurs; Goffman terms this circumstance 'retrospective fatefulness' (Goffman, 1967: 171) but does not develop this concept in greater detail. In article three, I argue that social workers and clients engage in retrospective fatefulness when they reinterpret some situations as problematic and consequential for their role performances.

Goffman does not accredit the telephone conversation much interest; in his view, it does not constitute a real interaction, as it lacks the physical dimension that accompanies all interactions (Goffman, 1967; Rettie, 2009). Goffman contends that the body is a piece of consequential equipment that provides embarrassment, complementary facial mimics, and bodily movements such as coughs, stretches, and yawns (Goffman, 1967, 1986). In an encounter, people assess visual cues of dress, manner, and bodily expressions to 'know with whom they are dealing' (Goffman, 1972: 77). Goffman writes that, in a phone conversation, such symbolic cues are absent; therefore, the voice must be relied upon to provide familiarity and categorisation of the conversation (Goffman, 1986: 211,217). However, through my empirical work with social workers and clients, I question this disregard for phone conversations and attempt to understand how social workers and clients make sense of what is going on in phone conversations with limited symbolic cues of interaction.

Zooming in on the analysis of article three, I examine the role of phone mediation in social workers' and clients' role performances in mediated welfare encounters in which non-verbal communication is absent. Social workers and clients may experience mediated encounters as problematic and consequential to their role performances because of the limited symbolic cues of interaction in a phone conversation, which can motivate inappropriate involvement in the situation. Such frame and role breaks can be retrospectively interpreted as fateful. Such instances may spur renegotiation of the power dynamics between social workers and clients, and visualise the stakes welfare encounters hold for the participants. The client identity entails a stigma of unemployment while the social worker's professional identity does not hold such a stigma. Their interaction thus implies uncertainty for the client (Goffman, 1990). Phone mediation restricts the performative repertoire and, therefore, alerts the participants to the uncertainty embedded in such

an interaction. Additionally, phone mediation may limit social workers' role to informational descriptions. In such instances, the professional may fulfil the organisationally expected role of documentation and effectiveness, while not satisfying the clients' expectations for a professional that attends to their social narrative.

Chapter 4: Research Context

This chapter introduces the Danish context for this research, focusing on political digitalisation ambitions, unemployment, and job centres. It gradually progresses from the broader contextual picture of digitalisation of the public sector and the employment area towards the empirical context of the job centres. The Danish job centre provides an empirical example of the everyday workings of technologies that support the identity negotiations, work, and agentic practices of social workers and clients. Unemployed clients are required to navigate an array of digital and self-help solutions, such as the digital CV tool, digital job agent, job centre site, digital mail, and completing digital applications. Social workers follow up on clients' completion of digital demands and navigate an array of systems and tools that support their work life, such as client record systems and systems across different services. The setting of the job centre is comparable to that of other public organisations and indicates the vast national and cross-national trends of digitalised public services.

A digital public sector

Denmark has taken on an internationally leading role in digitalising the public sector to develop e-government (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2022). Extensive reforms and policies have been formally issued and applied to various public services in which Danish citizens participate. Accessing bank statements, paying taxes, receiving public benefits, contacting a doctor, or looking up one's medical journal are all connected to digital systems and conditioned by digital verification. The digital is increasingly pervasive in Danish everyday life.

Governmental digitalisation strategies aim for a digitalised public sector in which digitally skilled citizens have easy and quick access to public services. Such digital transformations aim to bring about welfare, prosperity, innovation, and development of the best quality for citizens (Agency for Digital Government, 2019; Ministry of Finance, 2018; Ministry of Finance and Department of Employment, 2019; The Danish Government, 2019). Governmental digitalisation strategies emphasise that citizens should be at the centre of digital development and should be met by a coherent public sector, high-quality welfare service, and focus on professionalism in this

development (Ministry of Finance, 2018: 9). Nevertheless, the most recent digitalisation strategy (2022-2025) acknowledges that not all citizens can navigate digital solutions and suggests the use of analogue solutions in such cases (The Danish Government et al., 2022).

Following this development, the area of employment has seen extensive digitalisation of employment efforts and implementation of digital solutions for contact with and navigation of the job centre (Department of Employment, 2018; Hendel, 2020). Social work in employment services has long involved and continuously developed case management systems, client records, and various systems to support journal note-taking, information gathering, etc. These systems have become indispensable in the daily work of social workers, which is supported by the empirical data of this thesis. Formally, the job centre's clients and professionals must meet in person. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, social workers conducted conversations with clients using video or phone calls. Since then, legislation has included the possibility of continuing this practice for some unemployed groups. Still, for vulnerable clients of the job centre, video and phone calls instead of in-person meetings are proposed as a possibility and not a legal requirement (The Ministry of Employment, 2019).

Unemployment in Denmark

The general characteristics and trends of employment and unemployment in Denmark are both comparable to and different from those in other Nordic and European countries. In Denmark, approximately 73,300 people were estimated to be unemployed in June 2022, comprising 2.4% of the workforce aged 16–66 years (Ministry of Finance, 2022: 119). Of these, 21.4% were long-term unemployed, defined as a person being unemployed 80% of the time in the last 12 months (Ministry of Finance, 2022: 122). The proportion of people with long-term unemployment who experience social and health problems is comparable to that in other European countries (Nielsen et al., 2021; van Berkel et al., 2018). In comparison with other Nordic countries, the Danish unemployment rate is higher than that of Iceland and Norway, but lower than that of Sweden (Department of Employment, 2020: 26). Compared to Finland, the Danish unemployment rate for men is higher, while it is on par with that for women. Overall, the Danish unemployment rate is lower than the EU average (Department of Employment, 2020: 26). As such, unemployment in Denmark is low compared to other countries. As employment frequency is high, comprising

76.7% (Denmark Statistics, 2023), work and labour constitute a significant part of Danish society and citizens' everyday lives.

For the last three decades, the employment field has been dominated by ideals of individualisation and responsibility, which persuade clients to take individualised responsibility for their unemployment (Caswell, 2020; Pultz and Hansen, 2021). In unemployment policies, activation measures promote active, self-reliant clients (Caswell et al., 2010; Mik-Meyer and Silverman, 2019; van Berkel et al., 2018). Such policies aim to change the behaviour of unemployed people towards the labour market and require the client to complete certain tasks while simultaneously stressing independence (Matarese and Caswell, 2018; Pultz and Hansen, 2021). This approach is governed by economic incentives, which alternate between providing opportunities and sanctioning people for failing to meet certain requirements (Caswell et al., 2010). Currently, the principles of welfare conditionality have been adopted for employment efforts, which are both celebrated for their focus on efficiency and critiqued for their lack of recognition of the heterogeneity of vulnerable client groups, which puts this group at an economic and social disadvantage (Larsen and Caswell, 2022). For instance, vulnerable clients cannot respond to the economic incentives of sanctioning practices within employment services in the same way that more resourceful unemployed groups might (Larsen and Caswell, 2022; van Berkel et al., 2018). These policy trends are not unique to Denmark but are pervasive across European countries and present challenges for the employment of vulnerable clients (Andersen et al., 2017; Matarese and Caswell, 2018; van Berkel et al., 2018).

Because vulnerable clients experience multiple problems in addition to unemployment, they are often in contact with multiple welfare services simultaneously, such as employment, health, and social services (Nielsen et al., 2021). Their client trajectories are often long and complicated because their cases must be coordinated across different institutions, which can result in considerable waiting times (Nielsen et al., 2021). Vulnerable clients need additional assistance in returning to the labour market, and research shows that the longer clients stay on public benefits, the harder it is for them to exit the public support system (Kaae and Bentzen, 2019; Nielsen et al., 2021; Væksthusets Forskningscenter, 2019). To help clients return to the labour market, one must consider the individual client's experience of what makes sense to them in their case, not a one-size-fits-all solution (Danneris, 2018: 370).

Danish job centres

In Denmark, active labour market policies are implemented through job centres. There are 94 job centres in Denmark whose task is to guide unemployed clients towards the labour market through training, a job, or education. The unemployed are divided into categories: young people under 30 years and adults above 30 years. These categories are further divided into sections with different focal points such as sickness, enquiries into working capacity, mental health issues, and complex social challenges. Danish job centres are organised at the municipal level (Breidahl and Seemann, 2009; Caswell, 2020) and provide a combined access point to the welfare system.

The Danish labour market system aims to separate the labour market focus from social policy measures (Baadsgaard et al., 2014; Breidahl and Seemann, 2009: 42). Formally, job centre professionals must attend to the question of labour market participation as a core goal in encounters with clients (Caswell, 2020). However, formal separation between employment efforts and social policy measures is hard to accomplish in working with vulnerable clients because such work necessitates addressing the clients' social problems (Baadsgaard et al., 2014). Indeed, the employment policies have, in recent years, gradually extended the focus to include the vulnerable clients' problems in addition to their unemployment (Caswell, 2020). Thus, even though the core activity in the encounters between social workers and unemployed clients is to talk about labour market participation, much of this work also involves managing a social dimension revolving around clients' social issues and struggles. For many vulnerable clients, returning to ordinary employment or employment of any kind is not a realistic possibility, but the welfare encounter must still address the labour market to fulfil policy requirements (Caswell, 2020).

Digital requirements and tools take up increasing amounts of time during encounters between social workers and clients. Different digital requirements apply to different client categories. For instance, the category of job-ready citizens refers to being able to take on ordinary employment, have an active CV on Jobnet, actively apply for jobs, digitally document these applications, book meetings online, and so on (Danish Agency for Labor Market, 2020). Job-ready clients can be long-term unemployed, frequently revisit job centres, and experience problems in addition to unemployment. The category of activity-ready citizens refers to those who are unable to take on ordinary employment. These citizens constitute a group with a wide range of health and social problems, and they receive the lowest unemployment or sickness benefits (The National Board of

Social Services, 2017). Activity-ready citizens are required to have a CV on Jobnet, but it does not need to be active or searchable.

The COVID-19 lockdown provided new conditions for job centres and encounters between social workers and clients. Employment efforts were conducted entirely through digital and technological means, creating tensions and difficulties for both social workers and clients. Although making video calls with the unemployed is possible, being a vulnerable client can pose challenges to such participation. Clients might not have smartphones or Internet access, or they may be uncomfortable using video devices for conversations with representatives of welfare services. For these reasons, and according to my empirical data, welfare work with the vulnerable unemployed had mainly shifted to everyday phone technology.

'[A] constructivist grounded theorist would say, develop the analytic story you construct from the data. What we *do* with data is crucial […] We seek creating a collective analytic story from analyzing individuals' stories by attending to research participants'—and our own— meanings, language, and actions.'

Charmaz, K. and Belgrave, L. in *'Thinking about Data with Grounded Theory'*: (2019:750)

Chapter 5: The Research Process

This thesis follows Charmaz's (2014, 2020) development of the grounded theory approach that adopts a social constructivist view of reality; that is, constructivist grounded theory. As the introductory quote states, '[w]hat we *do* with data is crucial' in a constructivist grounded theory approach, which stresses the researchers' involvement and interpretations of the collected data and construction of the 'analytic story'. In this thesis, I combine the analytical tools of constructivist grounded theory and the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism, which aids me in attending to the 'meanings, language, and actions' of the research participants' stories. This combination emphasises how social phenomena are constituted as social practices through which interactions and shared interpretations can be examined through rigorous yet flexible exploration (Charmaz, 2014: 262,278; Silverman, 2021: 4ff). Collectively, the combination of symbolic interactionism and constructivist grounded theory encourages an open and curious approach to data collection and analysis, developing and constructing the 'analytic story' from the data.

The data for this thesis comprise interviews with social workers and clients, which I will elaborate on in this chapter. There is a certain beauty to this thesis' aim of foregrounding mundane technologies and the fact that the main part of the study's empirical material was conducted using the mundane device of a phone. This chapter will, therefore, also reflect on the use of communication devices, such as phones, to conduct interviews.

Data collection

This thesis builds on interviews conducted in three Danish job centres. These job centres were selected as suitable empirical sites because they had been working with digitalisation for some time and had been utilising digital solutions for different client groups by the time of data collection. These job centres were situated in three similar urban areas in medium-large Danish cities. Data were collected from within teams of social workers who worked specifically with vulnerable clients. A potential limitation of this case selection is that smaller provincial municipalities may have had digital realities different from those observed in the three urban job centres. However, choosing these job centres provided access to studying the work practices within and clients' contact with a digitalised organisation, which was key for this research. Still, it was soon evident that even in job centres which have been working extensively with digitalisation, fewer digital solutions and requirements were in place for vulnerable clients, and mundane digital technologies took up considerable parts of social workers' and clients' talk about their everyday practices within the job centre. For this reason, I decided to readjust my research focus to the mundane technologies that supported social workers' practices and clients' contact with the job centres.

In total, 41 open-ended interviews were conducted with social workers (24) and clients (17) as the main sources of data for this research. The interviews were conducted in Danish. All interviewees have been pseudonymised, and recognisable details in their stories have been changed. Different pseudonyms were used across the articles to ensure that the accounts of the interviewees could not be followed or recognised across publications. The research sites of the job centres were kept confidential throughout the research process. The research adhered to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, 2016), and all data were stored in secure folders with restricted access.

Interviewing social workers

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all 24 interviews with social workers were conducted via phone (9) or video call using Teams (15), according to the social workers' preferences. Social workers were recruited through an open letter of invitation communicated by their local team leaders (see Appendix C). I was either put in contact with social workers who wanted to participate or contacted directly by interested social workers. One limitation is that certain social workers chose

to reply to my letter of invitation or to the team leader's request. For instance, it could be that social workers who were mostly positive towards digitalisation chose to respond. Nevertheless, as the letter and invitation to participate were openly distributed, all social workers in those teams, regardless of their opinion about digitalisation, had the possibility of replying and participating in the study. I recruited social workers from teams who worked with vulnerable clients above 30 years of age who, as per the official categorisation of job centres, were long-term unemployed and had other problems in addition to unemployment. These teams ranged in size from 15 to 20 employed social workers.

The following table presents an overview of the interviews with professionals and their characteristics.

Table 1: Overview of interviews with social workers

Professionals	Number	Average length of interview in minutes	Job description	Interviewing device
General characteristics	24	78 min	9 social workers, 8 social workers with counselling responsibilities, 7 social workers with specialised responsibilities	9: Phone and 15: Online
Interviewees	Experience in the current job position	Length of interview	Job description	Interviewing device
Else	5 years	81 min	special counsellor for long-term unemployed	Phone
Peter	7 years	91 min	special counsellor for long-term unemployed	Phone
Trine	10 years	77 min	social worker with special focus on clients exiting crime	Phone
John	6 years	94 min	social worker	Phone
Fie	8 years	70 min	social worker	Phone
Alice	6 years	85 min	social worker	Phone
Eva	6 years	51 min	social worker	Phone
Naja	4 years	90 min	social worker, special focus on disadvantaged housing areas	Phone
Grete	8 years	99 min	social worker, with special focus on rehabilitation programmes	Phone

Anna	7 years	80 min	social worker, special focus on internship placements	online
Kirsten	3 years	80 min	social worker, with special focus on rehabilitation programmes	online
Vera	6 years	43 min	special counsellor for clients with mental health issues and mentoring	online
Rita	2 year	102 min	social worker	online
Tina	19 years	99 min	job counsellor for rehabilitation programmes	online
Liv	1 year	72 min	job counsellor	online
Nick	4 years	90 min	social worker	online
Mia	9 months	75 min	social worker	online
Marc	5 years	83 min	job counsellor	online
Martha	more than 10 years	60 min	job counsellor	online
Anja	9 ears	102 min	social worker	online
Tabita	7 years	55 min	social worker	online
Ann	6 years	53 min	social worker, with special focus on rehabilitation programmes	online
Thea	5 years	74 min	job counsellor	online
Rie	3 years	65 min	social worker, with special focus on rehabilitation programmes	online

Social workers in various roles, such as consultants, counsellors, and caseworkers, work with vulnerable clients. Most have worked in employment-related areas for a long time, but it is common for them to change roles and responsibilities within the job centre over time. All the social workers held regular meetings with their clients. The interviews focused on their experiences in their current job position. Years of experience in their current job position seemed to impact how well-established their knowledge and routines were for using ICTs in their work. This was dispersed according to age. Social workers ranged between their late 20s and mid-60s; the age of retirement in Denmark is 67. Age differences in managing digital technologies in social workers' everyday work lives were not pursued as a theme in the interviews or subsequent analyses because they did not constitute a research interest in this study.

During the interviews, open-ended questions were posed, followed by intermediate questions (Conlon, 2020: 227) that probed for more specific descriptions and examples of the social

workers' statements and explanations. Before and during the interviews, I encouraged the social workers to think of client cases in their work lives, which helped generate narratives and practice examples (Charmaz, 2020; Conlon, 2020). Such examples allowed me to gain a better understanding of their everyday lives and how they chose to present themselves to me as well as exemplifying their explanations and answers to questions.

The structure of the interview

The interviews were semi-structured and divided into four themes which I followed flexibly, adapting to the interviewees' flow of talk (the interview guide is provided in Appendix A).

The first section aimed to establish a rapport between me and the interviewees, in which I openly asked them about themselves and their working lives. The introductory question motivated social workers to tell me about themselves: 'Can you start by telling me about yourself?' This was followed by questions about their specific workdays and work life: 'Can you describe what a typical workday looks like for you?' This question prompted detailed answers for a typical week, explanations of the working day before and during the COVID-19 lockdown, or a brief but timewise description of a typical working day. Many interviewed social workers remarked that they spent a lot of time on administrative documentation tasks, such as recording information about clients before or after the welfare encounter, documenting their work, sending letters and reminders, and making their work digitally transparent.

The second section addressed specific welfare encounters with clients. This section was initiated by an open question: 'Can you describe your group of clients?' This was followed by questions that probed descriptions of their clients' challenges, successes, and use of digital tools, such as the digital CV, self-booking system, and online applications. I encouraged empirical examples of situations to be shared through, for example, 'If you think back to a challenging or difficult interaction with a client, could you describe the scenario?' These exemplary descriptions provided a rich explanation of concrete cases and prompted additional descriptions of other cases and situations with varied challenges. The rest of the section probed the use of digital technologies and tools in encounters with clients by enquiring about the social workers' expectations of clients' digital capabilities, how social workers worked with clients during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the influence of legislation on their work.

The third section concerned digital systems and tools in the social workers' everyday work life. It broadly probed what kind of systems and tools they used and how they used them, and it explored the collegial side of their work life through, for example, how their colleagues managed digital tools and systems. This section also examined how the social workers experienced the impact of COVID-19 on their use of digital technology in work life. In this section, social workers remarked on the invisible administrative work (Hatton, 2017; Justesen and Plesner, 2023) inherent in their everyday work life, referring to all the work surrounding ICT management. They also revealed that some ICTs, such as the client record system, Facit, were indispensable to their work.

Finally, the interview concluded with open reflections on the digitalisation of welfare services. Questions such as 'What do you generally think about digitalisation and technological development? Or 'Is there something you are worried about regarding current developments?' The final questions of the interview were 'ending questions' (Conlon, 2020: 228) asking whether I had missed an important question in their view, by which I invited them to suggest what they thought was relevant (Charmaz, 2014). All interviews were finalised by enquiring whether the social workers could facilitate contact with their clients.

A point of saturation was reached for this group of interviewees when similar stories, accounts, and answers emerged in ongoing interviews. For instance, the interviews began by reiterating similar stories about how the digital CV tool was used by adapting and avoiding its use or mentally reworking the clients' attitudes. Another example is the analytical interest in the absence of non-verbal cues. Similar explanations and accounts emerged, for instance, the problematic aspects of mediated conversations due to the absence of non-verbal cues and the inability to comprehensively use body language in welfare encounters.

Interviewing vulnerable unemployed clients

The interviewed clients (17) were over the age of 30 (ranging between 33-66); except for one who was 28 at the time but was placed in the 30-year and above category of the job centre. During the COVID-19 lockdown, clients (12) were recruited through interviews with social workers through whom I openly distributed an invitation letter for an interview (see Appendix D). The clients contacted their social workers if they were interested and were then contacted by me. I renegotiated consent with all clients to ensure that they did not think they were obliged to participate due to being approached by their social workers. One limitation could be that social

workers might have sent the letter to all or only some clients, even though I asked for open distribution of the letter. During the partial reopening of society, I recruited clients (5) during observation at local points of contact at the job centre—the reception areas. These clients were recruited while I observed the work and everyday life at these centres. I asked them if they wanted to participate, stating the purpose of my study and their rights regarding the interview, and interviewed them in the reception area upon obtaining their informed consent. During observation, I spoke with many clients, 12 of whom I approached with the intent of conducting an interview. Five chose to participate, while the rest either declined, did not want to be recorded, or only had time for a brief conversation. As this recruitment occurred during the COVID-19 partial reopening, there were fewer clients in the reception area than usual, and most only came for their meeting with the social worker and left quickly again. Although I did not use the observations as data material in the thesis, they provided a broad insight into some of the difficulties and challenges that clients can experience when managing the digital requirements of the job centre.

In the following table, clients are presented both in terms of general and individual characteristics.

Table 2: Overview of interviews with vulnerable unemployed clients

Clients	Number	Average length of interview	Vulnerabilities	Unemployment	Interviewing device
General characteristics	17	65 minutes	physical, mental, social	6 months to 25 years	4: face-to-face 13: phone
Interviewees	**Age**	**Length of interview**	**Problems besides unemployment**	**Unemployment**	**Interviewing device**
Sarah	30s	38 min	Mental health issues, physical issues, social issues	12 years, short attempts at education	phone
Per	50s	49 min	Physical health issues, previous drug and alcohol abuse and incarceration	10–15 years	phone
Ian	50s	78 min	Health issues, physical disabilities	2 years	phone
Edith	50s	100 min	Physical health issues	2 years	phone

Linda	30s	91 min	Economic struggles, mental health issues	1 year most recently, 4 years before attempting education	phone
Tim	60s	49 min	Physical health issues, economic struggles	11 years	phone
Anna	30s	71 min	Mental health issues, economic struggles	11 years, with short-term education attempts	phone
Helen	40s	64 min	Mental health issues	7 years	phone
Berta	60s	93 min	Physical health issues	5 years	phone
Liam	40s	84 min	Physical disabilities, cognitive issues, mental health issues	16 years	phone
Lars	60s	80 min	Mental health issues	2 years, frequent revisits to the job centre for the last 20 years	phone
Cindy	30s	104 min	Physical and mental health issues	11 years	phone
Zenia	50s	48 min	Mental health issues	1 year	face-to-face
Rose	30s	54 min	Mental health issues	6 months, frequent revisits at the job centre	face-to-face
Lene	28	33 min	Physical and mental health issues	has never worked and no education	face-to-face
Ricardo	30s	29 min	Economic struggles	more than a year	face-to-face
Bo	40s	37 min	Social issues (homeless)	25 years, with short term placements and internships	face-to-face

The clients displayed various issues. Mental health issues were primarily represented by talk of stress, depression, anxiety disorders, and suicide attempts. Physical issues included disabilities, such as cognitive impairment, missing a leg, disc slips, lung disease, cancer, and heart disease. Social issues included previous incarceration, homelessness, economic struggle due to debt, drug and alcohol abuse, and experience of sexual violence. As I recruited clients through social workers and used the phone, the most vulnerable might not have been able to participate because they, for example, did not have a phone, connection, or other issues.

The interviewed clients were required to complete the digital CV and online self-booking of case meetings, navigate digital mail, digital ID, and job centre website, and complete applications online. A few updated the jobs they had applied for on Jobnet, a job-centre-specific website. Interviews with clients were conducted via phone calls, according to the personal preferences of the clients. A video call would have been helpful in terms of being able to read each other's expressions during the interaction. However, for some, it may have felt intrusive. I decided that letting the interviewees choose the technological medium could help offset the asymmetric power balance between interviewer and interviewee (Kvale, 2007: 14) and was more ethically sensitive. Sensitivity towards the stigma of long-term unemployment and other vulnerabilities affected the interviews, as some topics were uncomfortable for clients to speak about. I managed this by being sensitive to what they wanted to speak about and iterating that they did not have to answer questions that were uncomfortable for them.

Similar to the interviews with social workers, the interview questions were open-ended, followed by 'intermediate questions' (Conlon, 2020). During the interviews, I also prompted clients to use concrete examples and explain what happened in their encounters with the social workers. Following Charmaz (2014: 65), I aimed to allow unanticipated statements and stories to emerge. Therefore, I often tapped into life stories from the past to get a deeper understanding of their relationship with digital technology, everyday life, and meetings at the job centre.

Structure of the interview

The interviews with clients were semi-structured and divided into five themes which I followed flexibly (the interview guide is provided in Appendix B).

The introductory section of the interview started with an open question: 'Can you tell me a bit about yourself?' Some clients had difficulties starting with such a broad question and required

further direction before they began explaining. Other clients promptly embarked on a story about their life, often beginning the interview by stating some descriptive information about themselves and leading into an explanation of what, in their words, their 'problem' was. For example, 'I am in my fifties, and I am educated in housekeeping, and I have a problem. I have a slipped disc that cannot be operated on' (client) or 'I am in my thirties, and when I was pregnant with my daughter, it showed that I had cancer' (client). This was followed up and proceeded into another open-ended question about their typical everyday life. Such openings led to the unfolding of small narratives and ultimately inspired article two.

The second section concerned client trajectories within the job centre. In this section, I posed open questions that gave clients the possibility of providing vivid examples and explanations if they chose to. Specifically, I probed the first meetings with the job centre, their expectations of the job centre, and their experiences with the digital. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I noticed that clients also needed to speak about the current lockdown situation, which I included in our talk. This section also contained a broad question of what 'to work' meant for them: 'What does 'to work' mean for you?' This open question motivated explanations of their identity positions and past biographical events that they used to legitimise their views on work. The interviewees displayed stories of being hard-working and pride in having a high work ethic.

The next section focused on everyday life and the use of digital tools such as computers, phones, apps, and other official systems. In this section, I encouraged explanations of the past through clients' first experiences with the digital to situate their current use and gain an understanding of their general knowledge of the digital, which probed digital literacy.

The following section probed everyday life more generally, in terms of network and family ties. This section aimed to explain the everyday use of digital technology. In this section, I asked questions about their families and social networks, establishing how their everyday lives are situated in relation to other people and relationships using digital technology. Furthermore, some questions about social media were relevant to situating their everyday use of digital tools and applications in comparison with their organisational use of digital tools.

The last section contained open-ended questions inviting reflections on digitalisation, how it affected clients and society, and whether they might be concerned about something in this development. The final questions helped produce a sense of completing the interview, which is

advisable when interviewing on vulnerable topics (Charmaz, 2014: 68), such as the sensitive issues of experiencing the stigma of unemployment and having other vulnerabilities.

A point of saturation was reached for this group of interviewees when similar stories, accounts, and answers emerged in ongoing interviews. For instance, similar explanations emerged regarding what it meant to miss the facial expressions of social workers in mediated welfare encounters. Therefore, further data collection was not pursued. This decision was also impacted by structural issues of access and the pressing conditions of the COVID-19 lockdown and semi-lockdown.

Following the constructivist grounded theory approach, ideas and patterns were noted and pursued in ongoing interviews. This process guided me into the data analysis.

Data analysis

Multiple emergent ideas were initially noted during the interviews. Some of these were chosen for analysis, such as the missing visual cues of phone conversations and clients' identity work, while other ideas were abandoned, such as digital capital, digital literacy, and sanctioning practices. While striving to openly approach data, one always has some theoretical ideas in mind (Charmaz, 2014: 117). In my case, the symbolic interactionist theoretical ideas of institutional identities (Gubrium and Holstein, 2001; Gubrium and Järvinen, 2014), clienthood (Järvinen and Mik-Meyer, 2003, 2014), and role performance (Goffman, 1967, 1972) inspired my analytical gaze during data collection and the initial and substantive data analyses. For example, I found it curious that clients told stories that invoked different identities, which I pursued as an analytical theme that ultimately led me to article two.

For article one, I performed substantial coding when noticing the discrepancies in how social workers used the CV and pursued this theme in the following interviews and analysis. I first coded for action, meaning coding for what is happening in the data (Charmaz, 2014: 116f), and settled on the category of 'using the CV', which I initially coded broadly across the interviews with social workers using NVivo 12. I then conducted new open-ended coding within the extracted excerpts on the usage of the CV, which revealed 12 new codes with several subcodes each. These new codes were grouped into general codes. Three of these were selected as the starting point for the analysis in article one: 'building chronology', 'interacting with the CV' and 'adapting and avoiding'. (See Appendix E for a visualisation of the three selected codes).

For article two, the coding process was inspired by symbolic interactionist theoretical ideas about identity negotiations, accounts and techniques of self-presentation, as well as the constructivist grounded theory analytical strategies of initial coding and line-by-line coding (Charmaz 2014). In the initial open coding and reading of all client interviews, I noticed that the interviewees weaved in and out of different identity negotiations. For example, in answering the first question, the client Linda shifted between explaining why she is in the position of being unemployed through a victim-like character, in contrast to also displaying the position of being a fighter and heroically explaining her sentiments towards work and her previous work life. To understand what was going on in the interviews, I reread the interviews and coded each one for such identity negotiations, which often included one to three lines in each code because they shifted between invoking different types of explanations and identity positions (an example using an interview excerpt is included in Appendix F). The codes revealed that the clients presented different self-presentations throughout their interviews, narrating certain stories about themselves. The codes were grouped into three types of identity talk techniques: hero-talk, victim-talk, and resister-talk. These techniques provided the outset for the analysis in article two.

For article three, both social workers and clients commented unprompted on the missing body language in welfare encounters on the phone, which I noticed in some of my first interviews. For example, the social worker Peter was the first to note the importance of symbolic cues in conversations with clients. He explained that some of his clients preferred telephone conversations, but he needed to meet his clients face-to-face, at least for their first meeting. He explained how he usually read their body language, made eye contact, and used it to direct his conversation and trajectory with clients. In my first interview with a client, Per, he mentioned the lack of symbolic cues of interaction in phone conversations and noted that such mediated conversations did not work for him at all. Such explanations were recurring in the following interviews with both social workers and clients. These reflections arose spontaneously in response to questions such as: 'How do digital technologies take up space in your encounters with a client?' (social worker interview) or 'How does the COVID-19 pandemic affect your contact with the job centre?' (client interview) In the coding process, I first openly coded all reflections on mediated interactions, including mentions of visual cues and their absence, facial expressions, the use of body language, and comparisons drawn between face-to-face and phone encounters. I then conducted open coding within the excerpts and developed several new codes which were revised, reconstructed, and refined. Finally, I grouped the codes into overarching categories and selected

the following: 'using the mediated distance', 'negotiating what is effective' and 'missing out on non-verbal communication'. These categories represent the onset of the analysis in article three (see the coding example using an interview excerpt in Appendix G).

At this point, I want to reiterate the general approach adopted in this study by combining constructivist grounded theory and symbolic interactionism. This combination emphasises context and offers systematic tools to collect and analyse data and construct theories based on empirical data. Constructivist grounded theory principles were adhered to in the processes of data collection, coding, and analysis. Using flexible yet rigorous guidelines provided deep insights into the empirical material and a curious and open approach to data collection. While not constructing my own theory, this approach provided me with tools to approach my data curiously while keeping some theoretical ideas in mind.

As the analysis builds primarily on phone and online interviews, some reflections on this methodology are necessary. The interview itself is an interaction, comprising a dramaturgical performance of both the interviewee's and the interviewer's roles (Holstein and Gubrium, 2012; Scott et al., 2012). Therefore, I will next reflect on some of the interactional aspects of telephone and online interviews.

Reflections on the Mediated Interviews

A fundamental difference between face-to-face and telephone interviews is the absence of visual cues for interactions. While this also constitutes a significant focus in article three, the absence of visual cues requires independent reflection within interview practice. The absence of visual information is typically viewed as a potential disadvantage that affects building rapport, comprehension of meaning, managing responses and emotions, attention, interest, and interview duration (Irvine et al., 2013). In all interviews, I asserted my continued listening through acknowledgement tokens (Hm, mm, oh, aha) (Irvine et al., 2013) or what Charmaz (2014: 64) refers to as assuring 'hm's' from which stories continue. This was done frequently to reassure interviewees of my continued listening.

Although previous research has found that phone interviews are shorter (Irvine et al., 2013: 100), I found that this also depends on discrete interviewee groups. In interviews with social workers, the duration of the interview was affected more by a constrained workday than by the online

connection. Interviews with clients were affected by issues of reluctance to participate, opening up on certain topics, and sensitive matters of their vulnerable positions (e.g. unemployment, mental and health issues, previous drug abuse, homelessness, and tragic experiences). Encountering issues of reluctance is common when interviewing vulnerable individuals (Holstein and Gubrium, 2012). Digitalisation is not a sensitive topic; however, the circumstances surrounding their vulnerable positions were sensitive. Reflecting on what I, as a researcher, could do to make the interviewees more comfortable in the interview situation (Scott et al., 2012: 716), I was sensitive to which topics the interviewees did not want to pursue and encouraged an informal atmosphere through small talk. Some interviewees spoke openly and freely in the online and telephone conversations, while others found the mediated distance discomforting (Irvine et al., 2013). Additionally, as reported in earlier studies (Sturges and Hanrahan, 2004), phone interviews on sensitive topics offer relative anonymity compared to face-to-face interviews with a researcher and might provide better access to reluctant respondents.

Reluctance is also something researchers may experience during a research process. Scott et al (2012) argue against the assumption that the researcher effortlessly navigates access, builds relationships and employs various methodologies. Rather, the researcher also experiences doubts about their abilities and faces dramaturgical stress in the research process (Scott et al., 2012). The research process itself is a process of identity work (Snow and Anderson, 1987), in which a researcher works up certain expressions of confidence and assertiveness and works down feelings of shyness, self-consciousness, and the like (Scott et al., 2012: 718). For instance, in interviews with social workers, I demonstrated empathy through laughter to build a feeling of togetherness. In interviews with clients, I assumed a non-judgmental role and worked to express a certain open-minded self-presentation. Another example is treating the interviews with humility and the participants as experts (Scott et al., 2012: 724), in which process I downplayed my own knowledge to motivate the interviewees to explain the taken-for-granted aspects of their everyday lives.

As the interviews comprised mediated interactions (Rettie, 2009; Thompson, 2020), they provided for interesting cross-engagement and cross-talk, which depicted instances of shifting one's main attention to other people or digital devices while being in a simultaneous conversation with a person (Humphreys and Hardeman, 2021; Ictech, 2019). This motivated methodological reflections during the interviews, such as renegotiation of consent and reflections on missing visual cues between interviewer and interviewee. For example, during an online video interview with a social worker, she received a phone call from a colleague regarding a client. The social

worker taking a phone call while being in a call with me constituted a moment of cross-engagement (Humphreys and Hardeman, 2021; Ictech, 2019; Walsh and Clark, 2019), as the allocation of attention in the conversation shifted to the conversation with the other social worker, while the conversation with me was put on hold. This motivated dramaturgical acts of repairing the situation through explanations and accounts to build and uphold the desired personal fronts of both the interviewer and the interviewee. Such instances motivate reflections on allocations of attention and the ability of the researcher to successfully set up the scene of an interview, for example, the presence of other people in the room which the researcher cannot see, engagement with other technologies while talking to the interviewer, and so on.

There were other examples of interference or disturbance due to phone mediation which prompted dramaturgical repairs. For instance, in a phone interview with a client, Helen, she commented on not knowing the visual aspect of my face, which was important to her. This motivated excuses from my side, while I strived to perform the front of a humble and receptive researcher.

An important finding of this thesis is that the phone and online interviews were successful on many occasions. However, this success differed according to the interviewee groups. With social workers, it was easier to obtain an informal and trusting atmosphere; however, these interviews were constrained by the factors of the workday and its conditions. In the interviews with clients, I had to attend much more to my voice and expressions, being careful with how I posed questions. Paying attention to moments of cross-engagement, cross-talk, shifts of attention, and a lack of visual cues in mediated interviewing is important to consider when proceeding with digital and technological methodologies in future studies.

The interviews may also reflect a strategic interaction of game-like moves in obtaining and withholding information (Goffman, 1969). As an interviewer, I intend to obtain some sort of information to which I conduct an examination, while the interviewees control what information they want to reveal and what they aim to conceal. I do not wish to imply that the interviewees intended to deceive, nor that I, as an interviewer, intended to uncover hidden motives. Rather, I wish to shed light on the strategic component of such a conversation and reflect on how it plays out during a mediated interview. Missing symbolic cues of the body, such as facial mimics and attentive eye contact, may affect the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee, create misunderstandings, and impede the interviewer's ability to adjust and direct conversations around sensitive issues. Thus, the mediated interview might become a more strategic endeavour in the pursuit of overcoming the absence of visual cues.

Finally, I acknowledge that the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on the study in the way it was designed and executed, not least regarding the constraints on the interviewees themselves. For social workers, COVID-19 provoked a rather stressful situation and influenced their working days through, for example, changing to work remotely and using devices for core elements of their work—the face-to-face interaction with clients. However, it also provided space and opportunities for me to interview them flexibly, as they did not have to spend time setting up a meeting, but simply answer the phone or follow a video link. For clients, everyday life during the lockdown provided flexible conditions which made it easy to get in contact with them. However, their lives were affected by the stress of the global pandemic and their thoughts were quite preoccupied with the pandemic. Furthermore, the possibility of recruitment was constrained by the fact that every communication had to be transmitted through digital devices. For example, I could not recruit the most vulnerable clients who might not have a phone or be reluctant to speak over a phone.

All the research adhered to the principles of ethics and validity to build and ensure research integrity and credibility. Therefore, I will conclude this chapter with brief reflections on the principles of ethics and validity for this thesis.

Research principles: Ethics and Validity

Following the overall symbolic interactionist perspective, ethics and validity must be considered, adjusted, negotiated, and renegotiated throughout the research process, not least when writing the results and analysis. Overall, I adhere to both standardised ethical principles and a situationist ethical view, while validity is perceived as relative to the inferences drawn from the data (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019; Peräkylä, 2021).

On ethics

Adherence to standardised ethical principles refers to the following guidelines and specific procedures depending on the location of the study (Ryen, 2021). As the research was conducted in Denmark, I followed the Danish Code of Conduct and Research Integrity (Ministry of Higher Education and Science, 2014) and secured ethical clearance from Copenhagen Business School,

where the PhD project is being conducted. Furthermore, conducting the research in a sociological field, I followed the standards of the British Sociological Association (BSA, 2017).

I ensured that informed consent was secured and recorded (Kvale, 2007) by stating the purpose of the research, content of the interview, data processing, anonymisation, and their rights as interviewees, such as withdrawing participation or retracting any part of the interview. An open research design also motivates on-the-spot decisions as unanticipated questions and directions in interviews can arise (Kvale, 2007), which motivate staying attentive to ethical dilemmas during the interview. For instance, I had to renegotiate consent during an interview with a social worker after she had taken a call with a colleague about a client during our interview and conducted the conversation while still being in an online call with me.

On validity

When considering validity, multiple points of attention should be considered. First, the process of transcription, choosing quotes for analysis, translating quotes, etc. motivates the consideration of descriptive validity (Maxwell, 2002: 45ff), which refers to the transparency of the reported accounts. All interviews were transcribed using a transcription guide which focused on transcribing them in full, concentrating on the meanings and perceptions created and shared during the conversation (Oliver et al., 2005: 1277). Therefore, the transcription included pauses, sounds (coughs, sighs, etc.), and intonation, where such things added meaningfully to the conversation (a transcription key is attached in Appendix H). When translating the selected quotes for analysis, I stayed as close as possible to the original wording and translated slang and sayings to their equivalent in English.

Second, coding and analysing prompt reflections on the inferences drawn from the accounts studied and the concepts applied. Such considerations of interpretive validity (Maxwell, 2002: 48ff) also involved writing up the analysis in a transparent manner so that the reader could sufficiently follow the process, transparently presenting the coding process and the role of theory. Third, theoretical validity (Maxwell, 2002: 50f) was approached through careful reflection on the explanation and fit between the data and the theoretical concept. Exploring the utility of several concepts to describe relationships in data followed the logic of constructivist grounded theory analysis (Charmaz, 2014).

Finally, the institutional context of the research spurs reflections on the organisational framework of the interview itself (Peräkylä, 2021) and how interviewees chose to act and present themselves within such a situation. For instance, social workers and clients invoked the identity of an interviewee by answering interview questions and adhering to the norms and expectations of the interview. In addition, social workers invoked the identities of professionals, citizens, and colleagues, while clients presented the identities of vulnerable and agentic clients as well as hard workers, mothers, parents, and patients. Such identity presentations constitute points of interest in article two, in which the identity presentations of clients are the focus, and in article three, in which social workers' and clients' role performances in mediated welfare encounters are of interest.

'The term 'mundane technologies' connotes those technologies whose novelty has worn off; these are technologies which are now fully integrated into, and are an unremarkable part of, everyday life. To study mundane technologies is thus to explore how they mediate and reflect everyday life'.

Mike Michael in *Between the Mundane and the Exotic: Time for a different sociotechnical stuff* (2003:131).

Chapter 6: Discussion and Conclusion

As the introductory quote suggests, a study that pursues mundane technologies explores how such technologies 'mediate and reflect' everyday life. This thesis has embarked on such an exploration, foregrounding the role of mundane technologies that have become an 'unremarkable part of everyday life'. This final chapter discusses the contributions of the research and concludes the thesis (part one). It answers the overall research question of the study: *What role do mundane technologies play in social work with vulnerable clients and in vulnerable clients' agentic practices within Danish job centres?* I have addressed this question through three sub-research questions, each of which is covered in a separate article.

In addition to summarising each article, I relate the articles to one another and show how they jointly help answer the overall research question. In short, the first article examines how social workers use a mundane tool, the digital CV. The second article examines clients' identity talk techniques in response to the contrasting demands of the job centre. The third article considers phone mediation and clients' and social workers' role performances in mediated encounters. This chapter concludes by presenting some limitations of the current research and proposing directions for future researchers, interested in further exploring the role of 'unremarkable' mundane technologies.

Summarising the articles

Article 1: Strategic information: A qualitative study on the use of digital curriculum vitae for social work with vulnerable clients

Author: Alexandrina Schmidt

Status: Published in the *British Journal of Social Work*

This article answers the question: *How do social workers use the digital CV, a digital information system, in their interactions with vulnerable clients?* Utilising Goffman's framework of strategic interaction, this study contributes to the literature on the use of ICTs in social work, specifically the discussions on the use of information systems. Methodologically, the study involved 21 interviews with social workers in Danish job centres who reported working with the digital CV tool. This article exemplifies the role of the digital CV tool in social work and highlights how social workers can use the digital CV strategically while working with vulnerable clients.

The findings reveal that social workers use the digital CV tool in three ways. First, they collect detailed information about their clients through the digital CV, which tests the clients' expressed vulnerable identities. Clients attempt to control information about themselves, and social workers attempt to uncover this information using the CV. Thus, the CV constitutes a digitalised informational description of clients' occupational capabilities and vulnerabilities.

Second, social workers can use the information collected in the digital CV to reveal skills and resources which clients do not value and rework the clients' attitudes towards the labour market. Thus, social workers use the digital CV strategically, which risks rejecting the social information clients express. In social workers' perception, this work can reveal relevant skills and resources that clients can use in their trajectory towards the labour market. This strategy is prevalent among less vulnerable clients according to social workers' perceptions.

Third, in working with the most vulnerable clients, social workers avoid and adapt digital CV usage to benefit their clients, and thus resist prescribed procedures. In such instances, social workers control what information is recorded in the digital CV. Using the digital CV in such a manner can benefit clients but can also compromise the organisationally required digital

documentation and transparency of social work practice. This strategy was most prominent for those whom social workers perceived to be the most vulnerable clients.

This study demonstrates that social workers use the digital CV differently according to their perceptions of a client's vulnerability. When clients are perceived as most vulnerable, social workers attempt to resist the digital and structural constraints of using the digital CV tool. If clients are perceived as less vulnerable, social workers tend to use the tool strategically to rework clients' attitudes towards the labour market. Thus, social workers collect and strategically use digitally stored information to help their clients.

The digital CV is shown to be both a constraining and an enabling aspect of the welfare encounter. This indicates that, as mundane technologies become indispensable to social work practice, they support and reproduce established practices, such as valuing surface information at the expense of social narrative information, and make strategic choices available through selecting, recording, and collecting information.

Article 2: Heroes, victims and resisters: Agentic vulnerability and techniques of identity talk in digitalised job centres

Authors: Alexandrina Schmidt and Susie Scott

Status: Provisionally Accepted in *Symbolic Interaction*

While article one focuses on the perspective of social workers, article two takes the perspective of vulnerable clients and discusses clients' techniques of identity talk in response to the demands of the job centre, including digital requirements such as self-service solutions. It answers the following question: *How do vulnerable unemployed clients manage their identity dilemma of performing both agency and vulnerability in digitalised job centres?* This study contributes to the literature on client identity work by focusing on identity dilemmas. Building on 17 interviews with vulnerable clients, this article demonstrates that clients respond to contrasting demands of the job centre, including digital requirements, through agentic vulnerability. We argue that agentic vulnerability combines the contrasting need to adopt both agentic stances and the vulnerable position of clienthood.

The findings reveal three identity talk techniques through which clients exhibit agentic vulnerability. First, through *hero-talk*, clients present themselves as workaholics for whom unemployment is an exceptional episode in their lives. Using hero-talk, clients seek to reject the stigmatising effects of their non-worker identity. In so doing, they emphasise their agentic capabilities amid constraining vulnerable positions and create role distance from the unwanted identity of unemployment.

Second, clients use *victim-talk* to claim a vulnerable and passive position by offering sad tales about sickness and tragic misfortune, claiming to be victims of circumstance. Through victim-talk, clients emphasise their vulnerable positions to exonerate themselves from blame for their current unemployment.

Finally, the clients engage in *resister-talk* as they respond to the digital requirements of the job centre through three subtypes of techniques: doing something, doing nothing, and non-doing. Through 'doing something', clients diligently respond to all the digital requirements but disguise their more sceptical attitudes towards the utility of digital requirements, such as the digital CV, which they do not use in their job search. Through the strategy of 'doing nothing', clients display subtle resistive stances by refusing digital requirements, such as completing online applications or receiving digital mail. The strategy of 'non-doing' is performed by neglecting and avoiding reacting to digital requirements, such as neglecting to read digital mail or other case-related documents and plans. While such strategies reveal subtle resistive stances and create role distance, disengagement with digital requirements through rejection or neglect can also impede clients' progress within the job centre.

This study shows that vulnerable clients' identity work and agentic practices are embedded within the digital infrastructure of job centres. Mundane technologies play a part in shaping clients' possibilities to reconcile the contrasting demands of clienthood. The article also demonstrates that subtle forms of resistance can be revealed by noticing the interplay between unremarkable, mundane technologies and identity work through what people do not accomplish, do not do, or neglect to act on.

Article 3: The role of phone mediation: Social workers' and vulnerable clients' role performances in mediated welfare encounters

Author: Alexandrina Schmidt

Status: Submitted to *Qualitative Social Work*

While articles one and two examine the role of mundane technologies from the perspectives of social workers and clients separately, article three combines these perspectives to examine the role of phone mediation for social workers' and clients' role performances in mediated welfare encounters when visual cues of interaction are absent. It answers the following question: *What role does phone mediation play in the role performances of social workers and vulnerable clients in mediated welfare encounters?* This study examines the perspectives of social workers (24) and clients (17) and contributes to the literature on the integration of mediated welfare encounters in social work practice. Utilising the Goffmanian interactional concepts of frame, role, and retrospective fatefulness, this study demonstrates the negotiations of role performances in interactions where non-verbal communication is absent.

First, the findings show that phone mediation may provide confidential distance which can enable some clients' participation in welfare encounters according to social workers. Phone mediation may also accord flexibility to social workers' workday. However, the findings also show that mediated encounters may risk being insignificant for clients' trajectories and restrict social workers' and clients' roles. For example, social workers may experience that their role is restricted to attending to informational descriptions and not clients' social narratives.

Second, social workers and clients may experience mediated encounters as risky and consequential for their role performances due to the lack of visual cues of interaction which they normally use to direct their performances and express their situational roles. Thus, the analysis shows that phone mediation may visualise the consequentiality of the welfare encounter. For social workers, their occupational identity and the attainment of the organisation's goals are at stake. For clients, however, the stakes of welfare encounters comprise their sense of security, social and economic support. These stakes are often taken for granted in routinised face-to-face welfare encounters but become visible in phone-mediated welfare encounters.

This article highlights everyday technologies, such as the phone, which might otherwise be taken for granted. It argues for including these further in research on the digitalisation of social work. While the study suggests that mediated encounters might accord clients opportunities to renegotiate the dynamic of the welfare encounter, it also shows that removing non-verbal communication presents challenges for the social worker-client relationship, welfare delivery and clients' sense of security. Furthermore, this study highlights the inextricability of risks and opportunities regarding integrating technology into social work practice.

Cutting across articles: Vulnerability, resistance and inextricability of opportunities and challenges

This thesis focuses on mundane technologies in the context of social work with vulnerable clients. In digitalisation studies, new and spectacular technologies such as predictive algorithms, risk assessments, and intelligent job matches are often highlighted, whereas mundane technologies integrated into everyday life tend to go unnoticed and unremarked. This thesis contributes to studies on digitalisation by foregrounding mundane technologies and examining the role that such technologies play in social work and vulnerable clients' agentic practices. Using a symbolic interactionist perspective that focuses on everyday life, this thesis provides theoretical and analytical tools for investigating the mundane aspects of digitalisation. Hence, this thesis exemplifies how interactional concepts, such as expression games, identity talk techniques, frame, and retrospective fatefulness, can be used to explore the interplay between social work practices, clienthood, and mundane technologies. Studies on digitalisation can be enriched by such a symbolic interactionist focus on the everyday, foregrounding the mundane in the digital.

Turning to the contributions across articles, mundane technologies play a role in social work with vulnerable clients and vulnerable clients' agentic practices in three ways.

First, the findings reveal that the use of mundane technologies in welfare encounters tends to differ according to clients' perceived vulnerabilities. Article one illustrates the use of the digital CV tool by social workers to examine and document their clients' expressed vulnerable identities. The use of the digital CV tool varied based on the social workers' perceptions of the client's vulnerability, thereby shaping the tool for their work practice. The findings in article three reveal a similar pattern, indicating that mediated welfare encounters can benefit social work with clients whom

social workers perceive as hard-to-reach. Simultaneously, mediated welfare encounters may be constraining when working with other clients. The findings of articles one and three resonate with recent research (Johannessen, 2023; Larsen and Caswell, 2022) emphasising that vulnerable clients should not be regarded as a homogenous group. This study revealed that the use of digital tools in social work tends to be organised according to clients' perceived vulnerabilities and vulnerable self-presentations. Thus, the first main finding is that mundane technologies comprise important aspects of welfare encounters, as such tools partake in directing the social worker–client relationship, which is organised according to clients' perceived vulnerabilities.

Second, everyday acts of (subtle) resistance are available through mundane technologies for both social workers and clients. Article one shows that social workers can resist the prescribed procedures for using the digital CV tool through acts that avoid or adapt the digital tool to benefit the most vulnerable clients in social workers' perspective. In article two, the findings suggest that clients may resist digital requirements by rejecting, avoiding, or neglecting to respond to them, thereby demonstrating subtle resistance. Article three demonstrates that conducting welfare encounters via phone can provide opportunities to renegotiate the inherently asymmetric power relationship between social workers and clients. Based on recent studies on social workers' everyday acts of resistance, (e.g. Carey and Foster, 2011; Strier and Breshtling, 2016; Weinberg and Banks, 2019) and symbolic interactionist studies that emphasise vulnerable clients' opportunities for agency and resistance (e.g. Caswell et al., 2013; Cuthill, 2017; Mik-Meyer and Haugaard, 2021), this study highlights that agentic and resistive practices may also arise in response to mundane technologies in public services, which bring opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, through mundane technologies, social workers and clients may be able to exercise everyday resistance that might not be spectacular, but mundane and subtle. On the other hand, resistive practices may also compromise the organisationally required transparency of social work, as shown in article one by avoiding compliance with the documentation regulations of the digital CV tool. Resistive stances may also impede clients' opportunities for social participation and case development, as demonstrated in article two through the neglect of digital requirements at the job centre.

Third, social work and vulnerable clients' agentic practices can be both enabled and constrained by mundane technologies. For instance, in article one, the use of the digital CV tool enables social workers to strategically use the information collected to mentally rework the attitudes of less vulnerable clients, which, from the social workers' perspective, reveals resources that the clients

did not know they had. However, the use of the digital CV tool also constrains social work practice by focusing on informational descriptions rather than clients' social narratives and challenges, which are revealed to be inapt for working with the perceived most vulnerable clients. Article two demonstrates that clients can perform subtle forms of resistance by removing themselves from the digital demands of the job centre through acts of negligence or rejection. However, clients are also constrained by their resistive stances, as such acts may limit their opportunities for social participation. In article three, I demonstrated that clients might gain opportunities to renegotiate the power dynamics of welfare encounters in mediated encounters, while social workers might utilise mediated distance to maintain hard-to-reach clients in their cases. Conversely, the analysis of article three also showed that clients' expressions of vulnerability and social workers' professional role performances can be constrained in mediated encounters because visual cues of interaction are absent. In response to recent research calls that advocate going beyond the advantages and disadvantages of digitalisation in future studies (Nordesjö et al., 2022; Steiner, 2021), this thesis demonstrates how examining mundane technologies in welfare encounters can reveal some of the inextricable aspects of the problems and opportunities of digitalised public services. Examining mundane technologies should be further included in studies on digitalisation in public services.

Mundane technologies shape social workers' and clients' opportunities for agentic practices, including resistive stances. However, these technologies are, in turn, shaped and adapted within socially, economically, and politically constrained public service situations. Mundane technologies partake in the everyday routines of public services and have become indispensable to the practices, performance of agency, and identity negotiations within social work and clienthood. Such indispensable and taken-for-granted technologies, however, play a role in producing and reproducing the everyday routines of welfare organisations and what it means to be a client or social worker. This thesis contributes to extending the focus from new and spectacular technologies to the mundane in the digital, where everyday social work and client identity work take place.

Conclusion and contributions

In summary, this thesis demonstrates how mundane technologies play a role in directing the social worker–client relationship, provide opportunities for social workers' and clients' expressions of everyday acts of resistance, and can both enable and constrain social work and clients' agentic practices.

Taking a symbolic interactionist perspective, this thesis foregrounds the mundane in the digital and contributes to the literature in three ways. First, this thesis contributes to discussions on information systems within the use of ICTs in social work. This is done by showing how strategic choices become available to social workers through using mundane digital tools such as the digital CV. The study also demonstrated social workers' everyday acts of resistance. Second, this thesis contributes to the literature on client identity work by focusing on identity talk techniques. The findings demonstrate clients' agentic vulnerability through their responses to the contrasting demands of the job centre, including digital requirements that require agentic engagement through self-service solutions. Furthermore, the study attends to theoretical perspectives that foreground what people do not accomplish, do not do, or neglect to act on, which can reveal subtle resistive stances in welfare organisational settings. Third, this thesis contributes to the literature on the integration of mediated welfare encounters in social work. The study demonstrates that the phone mediation of welfare encounters visualises what is at stake in welfare encounters for social workers and clients through an analysis of their role performances. It highlights everyday technology such as a phone and the importance ascribed to non-verbal cues of communication.

This thesis brings reflections on conducting the primary part of data collection through a mediated form of interviewing, that is, phone and online interviews. Three methodological points can be derived from these reflections. First, the mediated form of data collection demonstrates the importance of considering discrete interviewee groups and how the conversations, building rapport, and an informal atmosphere differ across such groups. For instance, interviewing social workers demanded special attention to the pressing conditions of their working days, while interviewing clients implied heightened attention to how I posed questions, my voice, and verbal expressions, for example, asserting listening through acknowledgement tokens in the absence of visual cues. Second, it is important to consider what the absence or limitation of symbolic cues of interaction means for an interview, and how such circumstances can make the interview a strategic endeavour in the pursuit of overcoming missing visual cues. Third, the prevalence of cross-

engagement during a mediated interview may entail dramaturgical repairs of the interaction and renegotiations of consent. In my work, this was necessary when a social worker engaged in a conversation about a client with her colleague during our interview.

As with any other academic work, this thesis is the result of interpretations, choices, selections, and limitations throughout the research process. The next section briefly reflects on the limitations of the current research.

Reflections on limitations

The theoretical perspective in this thesis is symbolic interactionist, and other conclusions and perspectives could have been used to analyse the collected data. For instance, theoretical approaches that stress sociomateriality could have offered a different way of understanding the role of technology. For instance, studies that focus on sociomateriality argue for the intertwining of the social and material (Dale, 2005; Dameron et al., 2015; Orlikowski and Scott, 2008). This approach, often used in organisational studies, would have implied that technology assumed a more active role in the analysis of the study and the way it organises and defines the client's problem. While this thesis focuses on the interactional negotiations and role performances of social actors (social workers and clients), a sociomaterial analysis would have also focused on how technology affords such negotiations and performances. The sociomaterial approach is constructivist; therefore, it is similar to my own approach. What separates an interactionist approach from a sociomaterial approach is how agency is ascribed to materiality, such as technology, and whether technology, organisation, and social actors are conceptualised as separate entities (interactionist) or inherently inseparable (sociomaterial).

Using interviews as the sole methodological approach could also be a limitation. While this method was most useful for answering the posed research and sub-research questions, an ethnographic study of how digital technologies affect the everyday practices of social work and clienthood could have been fruitful. For example, in examining social workers' usage of digital tools, such as digital CV, it could be useful to observe how social workers include the CV in a real-life interaction with a client and what this entails for the interaction and identity negotiations of clients and social workers within the welfare encounter.

Furthermore, it could have been useful to have access to recordings of phone conversations between social workers and clients. While I was not permitted to record or attend such

conversations in my own empirical work, such an addition could have provided nuance to how social workers and clients conduct the encounter, negotiate their identities, and overcome missing visual cues of interaction by using their voices.

One last limitation is that I did not include the managerial level in my research. For example, including interviews with the team leaders at the job centre could have provided insight into how the managerial level expects social workers to work with mundane technologies, such as the CV, and which expectations they might have for clients' agentic engagements with self-service solutions, for example. Thus, the perspectives of leaders could have provided nuance to the organisational expectations that frame social workers' and clients' role performances and identity negotiations in the welfare encounter.

Where this thesis concludes its work, others may be able to learn and develop new studies. In the next section, I point to some directions in which this thesis' contributions could be extended and inspire future researchers who might want to pursue this line of enquiry.

Suggestions for future research

This research shows that certain ways of interacting and working with clients are available through mundane technologies and suggests that there are differences in how mundane technologies are used when working with discrete client groups. While the study focused on a broad vulnerable group of clients and social workers' perceptions of their clients' vulnerabilities, future studies could empirically discern between types of perceived or categorised vulnerabilities. For example, research could focus on how clients with psychological vulnerabilities use and respond to mundane technologies such as self-service solutions, and what this means for welfare encounters and clienthood. For social work practice, such a focus may reveal possibilities for directing social work and the social worker–client relationship with different client groups.

Recent studies on social work have contemplated the division between traditional social work, which does not include digital public services, and digital social work, which includes digital technologies to deliver public services (Fiorentino et al., 2023; Løberg and Egeland, 2023; Pink et al., 2022). The best example of traditional social work is the face-to-face welfare encounter. The gradual inclusion of mundane technology in practices that traditionally do not include digital technology has spurred discussions on how to understand this new face of social work. For instance, Løberg and Egeland (2023) argue against binary thinking of social work divided into

traditional and new digital social work and rather propose to think of social work as multimodal. Pink et al. (2022) argue that social work has become a hybrid practice that integrates face-to-face and digital interactions. Taking the mundane in the digital seriously, this thesis' approach to contemporary social work can be best described as understanding social work as already multimodal, full of mundane technologies that mediate and support different aspects of social work practice, such as the social worker–client relationship and administrative tasks. Mundane technologies comprise the everyday workdays of social workers, and these seemingly invisible technologies support the expression of their professional identities. I suggest that future studies attempt to avoid the binary perspective of digital and traditional social work, and instead examine how social work practice is already made up of various mundane and spectacular technologies.

Future research could further investigate the use of information systems such as the client record system Facit. The social workers in this study revealed that Facit was indispensable to their work practices and constituted a significant part of their everyday routine. Social workers disclosed that they or their colleagues were 'superusers' of the system within their teams. Superusers are tasked with helping those who are learning to navigate the system or having difficulties with the system within a team of social workers. Facit is a complex system that manages almost all administrative work regarding client cases. The social workers disclosed that they documented their cases and conversations with clients in a specific language within the system. They also commented that the language used to record client conversations had changed because conversations and loggings had become available to clients. A future study could investigate how the language of notation within the system shapes a client's case, clienthood, and the social worker–client relationship. Such a study could examine the kind of digital identity that clients acquire through social workers' unintentional and intentional recording of information (cf. Huuskonen and Vakkari, 2015; De Witte et al., 2016). The recorded digital identities of clients have implications for how social workers meet, work, and set expectations for clients. In the interviews, some social workers spoke of how they might have intentionally omitted some information because they knew that clients had access to the case notations and how they were surprised by the discrepancies between what was noted about a client and how they experienced the client upon meeting the person. Future studies could further explore these findings.

Finally, when is a technology considered mundane and integrated into everyday routines? When and how do mundane technologies progress from being new and spectacular to becoming mundane and unremarkable?

One example of such a study could be the use of chatbots. Chatbots have been used by private companies to provide efficient and quick services to customers by answering simple questions or forwarding questions to a person if the question is too complex. Recently, such chatbots have been integrated to official services. In Norway, the chatbot 'Kari' is a virtual assistant that provides services for Norwegian citizens seeking help or information on municipalities' websites, which in turn reduces waiting time for assistance via phone. Similarly, Danish municipalities have begun integrating chatbots into their services. For example, the chatbot 'Muni' can provide answers to 5,500 specific requests in 50 categories and has been adopted by 37 of the 98 municipalities in Denmark (Jepsen, 2023). The chatbot 'Muni' is now being updated to include a voice function to aid those with hearing or sight impairments who might experience barriers to using this technology to obtain certain information (Jepsen, 2023). The ambition for Muni and other similar chatbots is that such virtual assistants will be able to assist clients with booking their meetings or social workers with looking into client cases. As chatbots begin to undertake such tasks, their assistance may become indispensable and integral to the work of and contact with welfare services. Future studies could longitudinally investigate how such chatbots increasingly become integral and taken-for-granted parts of citizens' interactions and enquiries into governmental and municipal services and what this entails for social work practice and citizens' communication with official services.

PART TWO

Article 1:

Strategic information: A qualitative study on the use of digital curriculum vitae for social work with vulnerable clients

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Abstract

This study investigates the use of the digital curriculum vitae (CV), a digital information system, in social work with vulnerable clients. The investigation takes the constructionist grounded theory approach to examine 21 open-ended qualitative interviews with social workers in Danish job centres. Social workers use digital CVs in three ways. First, they collect detailed information about their clients through a digital CV, which tests their vulnerable positions. Second, social workers can use the information collected in the digital CV to reveal skills and resources that clients do not value and rework the attitudes of clients towards the labour market. Third, social workers who work with the most vulnerable clients avoid and adapt digital CV usage to benefit their clients and thus resist prescribed procedures. Overall, the use of digital CVs depends on the perceived vulnerability of the clients. The current study shows that social workers collect and strategically employ digitally stored information to help their clients. Hence, they may risk overlooking the complexity of social issues or compromising the transparency of social work. The study demonstrates that the digitalisation of public service makes social work strategic in response to socially and technologically constraining welfare situations.

Keywords: digitalisation, information, social work, strategic, vulnerable clients

Subject categories: policy, politics and legislation (sub-categories: inequality, welfare benefits, welfare systems/theory), practice interventions (sub-category: IT and digital), social work profession (sub-category: social work practitioners)

Introduction

Digitalisation is now ubiquitous in society; thus, it also permeates the public sector (Schou and Pors, 2019; Trittin-Ulbrich et al., 2021). Public services are increasingly digitalising to support and govern social work through features such as case recordings, automation, risk assessments, information systems, online counselling, video meetings and decision-making systems (Burton and van den Broek, 2009; Eubanks, 2018; Gillingham, 2015, 2021; Plesner et al., 2018). New conceptualisations of social work include 'e-social work' (Eito Mateo et al., 2018; López Peláez et al., 2018), the 'electronic turn' of social work (Parton, 2008) or 'digital social work' (Løberg and Egeland, 2023; Zhu and Andersen, 2021). These alternatives emerge from the adaptation of varied digital tools and information and communication technology (ICT) structures.

Digital technologies are not passive tools: they must be understood as an aspect of the encounter between social workers and clients and should be apprehended within organisational and societal contexts (Gillingham, 2013; Plesner et al., 2018; Steiner, 2021). Varied investigations have probed changes in social work because of new technological developments, such as the coping responses and strategies of frontline workers (Breit et al., 2021; Ylvisaker and Rugkåsa, 2021), sanctioning practices (Torsvik et al., 2022; Vilhena, 2021; Wright et al., 2020), emotional labour induced by digital technology (Løberg and Egeland, 2023), the interactions and responses of social workers vis-à-vis the implementation of new technologies (Burton and van den Broek, 2009; Gillingham, 2013, 2015, 2018, 2021) and social worker–client relationships (Nordesjö et al., 2022).

The effects of digitalisation generate new challenges for socially disadvantaged clients of welfare services (Gubrium and Järvinen, 2014; Schou and Pors, 2019). Research has demonstrated that socially disadvantaged individuals find it difficult to engage with digital technology and ICT structures due to e.g. lack of knowledge, access, skills and resources to navigate digital technology, which leads to digital exclusion and exacerbation of existing inequalities (Helsper and Reisdorf, 2017; Ragnedda et al., 2020; Schou and Pors, 2019; van Deursen and van Dijk, 2019; Watling and Crawford, 2010). This article supplements the literature on the digitalisation of social work with a focus on vulnerable clients. The study empirically investigates the perspectives of social workers on their use of digital curriculum vitae (CV), a digital information system, in their work with vulnerable unemployed clients in Danish job centres. The analysis that follows is theoretically inspired by Goffman's (1969) framework on strategic interaction as it explores the interplay between social work, digital technology and information. The paper

addresses the following research question: How do social workers use the digital CV, a digital information system, in their interactions with vulnerable clients?

Digitalising information in social work

Digital technologies make it easy to collect data in interactions (Nordesjö et al., 2022; Trittin-Ulbrich et al., 2021). Although, the storing and recording of information are not new to social work, the level of documentation and the types of information stored in systems are novel developments (Parton, 2008). Such developments spark scholarly tensions about whether social work is shaped by or is shaping relevant digital technologies (Nordesjö et al., 2021). Research reveals a change in information collected through technologies in social work. A key argument in this literature is that information technology requires social workers to document detailed accounts of clients, producing informational descriptions that follow the logic of a database rather than social and narrative information (Gillingham, 2013; Parton, 2008; Steyaert and Gould, 2009). Depth of social explanations is replaced by surface information that results in social workers attending more to what clients do and less to why they do it (Gillingham, 2015). Working with surface information introduces the risk of neglecting the complexity of the clients' problems (de Witte et al., 2016; Gillingham, 2015, 2021; Lagsten and Andersson, 2018; Parton, 2008). Huuskonen and Vakkari (2015) found that the information stored in client information systems depended on intentional and unintentional selections by social workers. Clients can co-author their records through silence, controlling the offered information and withholding specific details (Huuskonen and Vakkari, 2015). Research highlights the importance of critically examining social workers' selection, recording and use of information for digital client information systems (Gillingham, 2015; Huuskonen and Vakkari, 2015).

Investigating talk surrounding the process of documentation, Matarese and Caswell (2018) demonstrated that talk directed strictly towards standardised forms did not substantially allow client participation but granted much transparency and accountability (Matarese and Caswell, 2018). However, talk that did not directly adhere to forms allowed greater client participation but less transparency and accountability (Matarese and Caswell, 2018). Recent research initiatives have pinpointed the inextricable nature of the problems and potentials of digitalisation in social work (Steiner, 2021). Researchers must thus consider both the beneficial effects of digitalisation (de Witte et al., 2016; Eito Mateo et al., 2018; Løberg and Egeland, 2023) and the problematic

consequences of digitalising public services (Plesner and Justesen, 2022; Trittin-Ulbrich et al., 2021).

Resisting structural constraints of welfare situations

Welfare institutions provide asymmetric and structurally constrained conditions for the encounters between social workers and clients (Gubrium and Järvinen, 2014; Mäkitalo, 2006; Mik-Meyer and Silverman, 2019). Digital technologies take part in these structural constraints and can change, strengthen and challenge social worker-client relationships (Nordesjö et al., 2022). In welfare institutions, such as unemployment services, professionals are assumed to take a neutral stance as institutional representatives to accomplish institutionally defined results (Makitalo 2006). In this context, social workers might find ways of collaborating with clients to solve clients' problems and reach organizational goals (Mik-Meyer and Haugaard, 2020). One such approach can be engaging in acts of resistance. The notion of 'resistance' describes everyday professional acts that counter coercive practices and pertains to aspects such as restrictive working conditions or imposed structures and regulations that affect the quality of work and influence welfare delivery (Carey and Foster, 2011; Feldman, 2022; Strier and Breshtling, 2016).

Professionals engaging in acts of resistance can be characterised as rogue social workers (Weinberg and Banks, 2019, p. 372). Conceptually, rogue social work follows the principles of social justice and ethics, and the term describes acts of bending the rules to manage demands and contradictions arising from policies and practices (Weinberg and Banks, 2019).

Deviant social work (Carey and Foster, 2011, p. 578) is another way of defining resistance in social work, and this term describes small acts of resistance, deception or sabotage. These acts can include spending more time on clients than assigned, exaggerating client needs, confronting management or using punitive interventions reluctantly (Carey and Foster, 2011). Deviant social work can be valued as positive when social workers engage in acts of lying and reshaping practices to benefit their clients (Carey and Foster, 2011, p. 587).

Resistance can also take the form of disruptive social work (Feldman, 2022, p. 760), which describes collective acts of resistance against authorities to support marginalised clients or oppose the worsening of one's working conditions. Resistance is, however, a contested concept in social work literature (Strier and Breshtling, 2016) and needs further empirical and theoretical examination (Carey and Foster, 2011; Strier and Breshtling, 2016).

Overall, the existing research on the digitalisation of public services encourages further investigation and mandates the application of novel theoretical perspectives to digitalisation of public services and its implications for social work (de Witte et al., 2016; Lagsten and Andersson, 2018; Plesner et al., 2018; Steiner, 2021). The interactions of social workers with digital technology and the collected information as well as resistance in social work should be subjected to further scrutiny (Carey and Foster, 2011; Huuskonen and Vakkari, 2015; López Peláez et al., 2018; Nordesjö et al., 2022). This examination constitutes a focal point for the present study, which is grounded in Goffman's (1969) framework of strategic interaction.

Expression games and identity tags

Goffman (1990, p.75) contemplates that the continued development of technological devices will create easier access to personal information for professionals of the state. This study employs the concept of 'expression games' (Goffman, 1969) in strategic interaction to investigate how the digital CV is utilised as an information system in interactions between social workers and clients. As all interaction is embedded in social structures, strategic interaction and expression games comprise general situations of reactions towards socially impinged welfare situations (Goffman, 1969; Mik-Meyer and Haugaard, 2020). The notion of expression games emanates from game-theory ideas and concerns the fundamental moves that occur between two parties in the pursuit of obtaining information (Goffman, 1969). In such instances, '[i]nformation becomes strategic' (Goffman, 1969, p. 10). Such situations depict mutual attempts to convince the other party of one's self-representation: people make moves in conversations to persuade the other party about one's appearance and thus effort to construct biographical coherence (Brensinger and Eyal, 2021; Goffman, 1969). Self-representations are tested for misrepresentation if one party detects that all relevant information has not been revealed (Brensinger and Eyal, 2021; Goffman, 1969).

Expression games comprise moves and countermoves (Goffman, 1969, p. 14). The 'control move' denotes one such tactic (Goffman, 1969, p. 12). The control move attempts to improve or control what is expressed about oneself to present a certain appearance to the observer (Goffman, 1969). Such efforts can involve repairs, accounts and justifications of expressed information (Goffman, 1969, p. 12f). The 'uncovering move' (Goffman, 1969, p. 18) represents another action of expression games. It is based on the observer's suspicion that the other party is attempting to control and conceal information (Goffman, 1969, p. 17f). The observer then engages in an

uncovering move by conducting an examination (Goffman, 1969, p. 17f). Finally, the 'counter-uncovering move' (Goffman, 1969, p. 19f) reflects the attempts of the concealing party to thwart attempts to unmask the information sought to be controlled.

'Identity tags' represent a pivotal concept for the counter-uncovering move of expression games (Goffman, 1969, p. 23). Identity tags could denote formal documents such as institutionalised qualifications as well as informal material such as mental records of biographical events (Goffman, 1969, p. 24). Such documents can either confirm the veracity of expressed information or reveal the game being played. Identity tags can be used as a move in reaction to the revelation of social events. The action of using identity tags in expression games amounts to the admittance that a game is being played and that a challenge must be overcome (Goffman, 1969). The challenge could entail an attempt to uphold the desired self-representation even though an identity tag disclosure has exposed the game (Goffman, 1969).

Methodology

Research setting

There are 94 job centres in Denmark tasked with helping unemployed individuals into jobs, education or job training (Sølvsteen, 2018). Job centres issue digital demands on clients receiving public benefits, who are expected to be able to navigate digital services such as 'Jobnet', the official job centre site, which requires them to meet stipulated conditions. Differing digital requirements apply to clients depending on their received public benefits. This study focuses empirically on vulnerable clients aged above 30 years and receiving the lowest rates of public benefits. The study attends to the digital CV as the digital demand to be satisfied. Formally, the digital CV is defined as a sales tool aimed at potential employers and forms the basis for the search for potential jobs by social workers (Danish Agency for Labour Market, 2020). These structural and technological circumstances condition the welfare situation in which the usage of the digital CV tool transpires.

Data collection

This study examined 21 qualitative interviews with social workers collected in 2021 from three Danish job centres. All 21 social workers engage in regular meetings and case proceedings with

clients who receive the lowest welfare allowances, including unemployment and sickness grants and who experience mental, physical and social problems which make them unable to take on ordinary employment. Of the interviewed social workers, 15 were formally trained; the rest were schooled in more specific domains such as job training consultancy, mentoring and mental health issues. Additionally, 18 of the interviewed social workers were female. The interviews were conducted online because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study also included interviews with clients. However, only the interviews with social workers have been considered for the present analysis given the chosen focus of this paper.

The interviews lasted between 45 and 102 minutes, averaging 90 minutes. The questions probed previous and current experiences of the social workers in using digital technologies and systems for their work; for instance, the use of client record systems.

Informed consent was obtained and recorded before the interviews were initiated. The introductory information emphasised that the interviewees could decline to answer questions they deemed uncomfortable during the interview. The participants were assured that they could contact the researcher after their interviews if they had any questions or considerations regarding their participation. All interviewees were accorded pseudonyms, and a process of anonymisation was devised for factors such as client-related details or case proceedings, names and other identifiable statements.

All interviews were recorded and stored in secure folders in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation. The study was approved by the Ethics Council of the researcher's home institution. The study procedures followed the Danish Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (Ministry of Higher Education and Science, 2014) and the BSA Statement of Ethical Practice (BSA, 2017).

Data analysis

Data were analysed using the constructionist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014). All interviews were transcribed for analysis using the NVivo 12 software and were subsequently coded. Pauses were noted during transcription through three dots and loud exclamations were inscribed in bold type; both aspects of paralanguage were retained in the quotes selected for the analysis.

The study used open-ended initial codes in accordance with the constructionist grounded theory approach and focused on coding for actions (Charmaz, 2014, p. 116f). Thus, an initial open reading of the interviews led to the discovery of multiple ideas. It was decided to further research the category of 'using the CV'. This process resulted in a new open-ended coding of this category throughout the interviews which revealed 12 new codes and several sub-codes. These codes were grouped into general codes. Finally, the codes 'building chronology', 'interacting with the CV' and 'adapting and avoiding' were selected as the starting point for the analysis.

Findings

In Denmark, all unemployed citizens must upload a digital CV on the job centre site, when registering their case at the job centre (The Ministry of Employment, 2019). A digital CV comprises a person's previous job experiences and existing competencies (Danish Agency for Labor Market, 2020). For social workers, the CV is a dialogue tool which can direct the conversation towards the labour market and enhance clients' opportunities of becoming employed (Danish Agency for Labour Market, 2020). Pivotally, the interview data revealed that the digital CV represented 'almost a social case rather than a CV' (Martha) and denoted a 'social evaluation' (Kim) through the detailed notation of the occupational biographies of clients. The following analysis presents three ways in which social workers use digital CVs in their interactions with clients.

'Let's be real': Testing the vulnerable identity

The social workers asserted that their clients found the process of creating a CV difficult. One social worker explained: '[…] for them, the CV does not contain success; it contains events, in which they have failed and felt like they weren't enough' (Bea). Another social worker indicated: 'Some of them have never been on the labour market and then it is difficult to write anything really' (Karen). A third social worker, Ella, supported this point: 'A lot of clients have not been working for a long time and it is hard for them to be confronted with that when they complete the CV'. A social worker pointed out that: 'for some, it is painful to fill in such a CV because they see that, okay I'm 45 and what have I been doing, 9th grade and that's it' (Rita). The social workers explained that the CV collected informational descriptions about some educational progressions and many educational and occupational failures. Thus, the CV contained statements such as 'no

real occupation to state' (Alice), 'no job-related experience at all' (Ann), 'hav[ing] been on cash benefit the last 17 years' (Jack), 'worked in a bakery when one was 17–18 and that's it' (Bea) and 'an early debut on cash benefit when she became a grown-up' (Zoe). A social worker, Martha, explained how she used CVs in her work:

> [The CV] is a good tool to create an overview. Some of my clients tell me: I can't anymore! I have been on the labour market my whole life and because of that, I drink, and my back is all screwed up. And then, when we work on the CV, then we see that it has been 15 years since you were on the labour market. And it is not to tease them, it is to say: Let's be real. What do we really have to work with. So, we don't peek around the bush all the time and can get a realistic picture and collaborate on the CV. So, I use it as an active tool (Martha).

The CV creates an overview of the client and tests the clients' self-representation. When Martha paraphrases her client's words on why the client cannot work anymore, the client's desired appearance is revealed as a working identity prohibited from achieving fulfilment because of a back injury that causes the client to drink. The client attempts to save face in the interaction by employing the verbal technique of an account or explanation (Goffman, 1969, p. 16). The extract quoted above illuminates that the client controls personal information seeking to ameliorate the present situation. However, the social worker treats this presentation as a 'peek around the bush' (Martha) or as something that must be uncovered by the construction of the CV: 'Let's be real' (Martha). The client's explanation is largely overlooked in favour of informational digitalised descriptions, which are valued as the 'realistic picture' (Martha). Another social worker stated: 'Well, it has sometimes been said: We are not a social office–we are a job centre' (Alice). This assertion emphasised the value accorded to formalised information as more suited to the job centre than social explanations. Therefore, the CV is a document comprised of digitalised informational descriptions collected by the social workers to test the vulnerable identity of the client.

'Mental reworking': The strategic use of information

The social workers noted that some clients can benefit from digital CVs, which can uncover labour market-related skills, resources or possibilities that the client does not value. A social worker commented that some clients are more skilled than they acknowledge: 'some of them may have more resources than they let on the first time around' (Nick). Another social worker observed that

'technically, they could maybe work with the CV if they were really forced to it, but it is very distant for them' (Zoe). A third social worker said: 'some forget about it and can't really see why they should do it and it is so much inherent in their behaviour that 'I can do it tomorrow' (Rita). A social worker, Martha, elucidated that a digital CV can reveal useful information such as competencies acquired from internships and: 'Maybe it wasn't so silly that you were here and there because you accomplished something, you can do something now'. Clients who can benefit from their digital CVs are often referred to as less vulnerable, younger and own more resources.

The social workers explained how a digital CV functions as a 'process-oriented tool' (Martha) in which clients were considered 'work-in-progress' (Nick). The digital CV can direct the clients' focus towards jobs through a 'mental reworking' (Zoe) of their attitudes towards work because 'it [the CV] can change their attitude on getting back to the labour market' (Jack). Social workers used the digitally collected information in the CV to rework client attitudes towards the labour market. A social worker, Zoe, explained:

Zoe: I think the intention is that clients begin to relate to this [the CV] more and don't just go about thinking: 'That CV thing does not have anything to do with me and it will never have'. But they get to work on themselves mentally towards thinking more about it. I think a part of the intention is a mental reworking towards thinking 'my case is about jobs' when we work with people on their CVs.

Interviewer: Is that something you have experienced?

Zoe: In some situations. I think some people are just very estranged towards the labour market if it has been a long time since you've been out working. So in some cases I think it will take longer. But I still think there is a mental reworking somehow. I think this focus in casework is alright, because it is also easy to let the conversation be controlled by what occupies them right now. […] So I think it is alright that I can say: 'Nice to hear about this and this' or 'that is too bad to hear, but let us also talk about the CV'. I think for me it is a tool that can pull back the conversation towards work, which is what I have to do. I am the job centre (Zoe).

Over time, a digital CV can accomplish a 'mental reworking' (Zoe) of a client's attitude towards the labour market. Clients may attempt to 'uncover' (Goffman, 1969, p. 18) and reject the technology's mental reworking by articulating social issues occupying their minds that may not correlate to the work-related focus of the CV. The social worker may, in turn, reject the relevance

of the social facts and focus on information related to work: 'I am the job centre' (Zoe). Using the digital CV in welfare encounters, social workers can accomplish a mental reworking through the strategic use of information provided by the client; conversely, this type of interaction does not allow much space for social explanations.

'Oops, I forgot': Resisting technology

Well, we do follow an excel sheet. Things could not exist if we did not have sheets. So everything amounts to how many case meetings we have had. Then, we are measured on whether we talked about the CV and the labour market. And what we have to deal with are sick people and people struggling with cancer or addiction, but we must talk about those [the CV and the labour market] things because otherwise it does not count. It is this new public management. We are measured all the time. But you cannot measure social work like that! You never could! (Rita).

Rita highlights the impossibility of measuring social work through excel sheets and digital information systems. She points to the risks of overlooking the complexities of clients' social problems (Parton, 2008) in following the logic of an excel sheet. The interview data revealed that social workers bend and reshape the digital technology's procedures in favour of the most socially, mentally and physically vulnerable clients.

Social workers adapt the meaning of digital CVs working with the most vulnerable clients. CV adaptations diverge from the 'classical CV all of us use' (Martha), as 'normally the CV is something you write for employers and they [the clients] feel like they are miles away from the labour market' (Mia). The CV comprises information not intended for employers; it is used to 'compile an overview' (Ella) and functions as an internal document for case proceedings to 'give an insight for the rehabilitation team' (Mia). A social worker, Ann, explains:

Ann: They are very short, well, they must be presentational CVs, primarily […] they [the CVs] are thin some of them.

I: How do you use a CV like that in your work with clients?

Ann: [makes a small giggle and hesitates] Well that is it. I don't do that a lot because I think, well … Damn, when there are a lot of them who are so far away from the labour market. […] I do not understand how it should make sense in a case meeting to talk about

jobs and the CV, when I know they are in a very different position and can barely have a functioning everyday (Ann).

According to Ann, the CV is 'presentational' and 'thin' and does not make sense for people who can 'barely have a functioning everyday'. Asked about her utilisation of the digital CV, she giggled a bit and hesitated, explicating her evasive use of the CV through engaging explanations of her clients' vulnerability. Social workers reject the pre-set procedures of the technology when they avoid using the CV. In so doing, they adapt the meaning and use of digital CVs and attempt to 'control' (Goffman, 1969, p. 12) stored information about their clients.

Social workers working with clients engaged in an assessment of their working abilities and the likelihood of early retirement, avoid using digital CVs as much as possible. A social worker noted that she 'does not use it [the CV] much' (Karen) and another explained that: 'those who are furthest from the labour market, they cannot engage with the CV at all' (Ella). A third social worker mentioned that she abstained from creating CVs for some clients when she deemed that the details necessary to create the CV would 'rip up in traumas' and be 're-traumatising' (Liz). Social worker, Karen, expressed:

> Karen: […] having my group of clients in mind I am struggling to see the point, because it [the CV] is made for those who are ready for the labour market. If you create a CV and apply for jobs, well, then it makes tremendous sense because the companies can view your CV. But poor John, who sat on a bench for 20 years drinking beer and some vodka and what not. He is illiterate and what can he do? So we have to create a CV, but he cannot use it for anything. Well, not in the way it is meant to be used. And then it becomes a bit tricky for me how I should bring the client further. So I feel that I face an obstacle course sometimes with some of these tasks, which seem a bit foolish because they stand in the way of me getting the client further.

> I: […] these things that you must do that do not necessarily make sense for getting people closer to the labour market, as you say, well, how do you handle that, what do you do?

> Karen: I have to say … well … Ehm… Oops, I forgot that I should do that [the CV] (Karen).

Forgetting requirements throughout the 'obstacle course' (Karen) of fitting policy to practice represented a widespread tactic of social workers involved with the most vulnerable clients. This tendency indicates that the technology is not apt for such groups of clients and fosters statements

such as 'Oops, I forgot' (Karen). A social worker elucidated that fulfilling the digital CV requirement 'is for the sake of jurisdiction, it is not for the client' (Nora). A second social worker expressed the opinion that fulfilling structural requirements such as the CV 'steals attention away from the clients' (Louisa). Louisa elaborated that other tasks take priority in her work; therefore, 'I am not very good at working on the CV. And the clients, they cannot do it by themselves. And if they can, then it is a little irrelevant because it is not a CV we have to share with employers' (Louisa). According to the interviewed social workers, the CV was unsuitable and irrelevant for the most vulnerable groups, which is why they attempted to adapt or avoid using the digital CV. However, the CV also represents a documentation process and thus, denotes an investigation into the social workers because the digital documentation of information ensures the transparency of their work. Social workers justify contradicting the structurally prescribed procedures of digital documentation by asserting that they have more important tasks to perform and citing the vulnerability of their clients and the irrelevance of the CV for their work outcomes. Social workers thus find ways of resisting the structural demand of the CV 'excel sheet' (Rita) in favour of their clients at the expense of documentation-related transparency.

Discussion and conclusion

The analysis revealed three ways in which social workers use the digital CV. First, social workers use digital CVs to gather information about their clients and test the expressed vulnerable identity of their clients. Second, social workers strategically utilise the information collected in digital CVs to reveal relevant but undervalued resources, skills and opportunities in their clients. Social workers may act in this manner with their more resourceful and less vulnerable clients to rework their clients' attitudes towards the labour market. Third, social workers engaged with the most vulnerable clients bend and reshape the procedures for the use of the digital CV. Hence, social workers can resist the structural constraints of a digitalised welfare system and strategically control the information that is recorded to favour their most vulnerable clients.

The findings of this article resonate with the key literature reporting the increased use of surface information in social work and the decreased focus on social narratives due to utilisation of digital information systems (Gillingham, 2013, 2015; Parton, 2008; Steyaert and Gould, 2009). This study revealed that social workers attend to surface or social information depending on the perceived vulnerability of their clients. In some cases, social workers attend more to informational

descriptions than social issues asserted by clients. However, social workers reject the technology's emphasis on informational descriptions when working with the most vulnerable clients. In so doing, they resist the digital and structural constraints of the welfare encounter by bending, reshaping and avoiding usage of the digital information technology. This study's conceptual use of identity tags and moves in expression games (Goffman, 1969, p. 11f), contributes to the understanding of the digital CV as a detailed informational document that tests vulnerabilities vis-à-vis the occupational identity of clients. The focus on social workers' interactions with technology shows that digital CVs are applied to assess the vulnerability of clients and the information revealed in this assessment. It also reveals that the digital CV comprises an important aspect of the welfare encounter that directs the social worker-client interaction and the collected information.

The existing literature emphasises the selective and controlled information offered by clients and selective usage and recording of information by social workers (Gillingham, 2015; Huuskonen and Vakkari, 2015). This study found that social workers selectively use the information provided by their clients by testing the expressed facts, using information strategically to rework clients' attitudes and bending or reshaping the given technology to favour their most vulnerable clients. Social work shapes and is shaped by digital technology (Nordesjö et al., 2022). The digital CV shapes social work because it directs and constraints the interaction between social workers and clients within digitalised structures. Social work, in turn, shapes digital CV technology through the strategic adaptation of its structurally prescribed rules, uses and procedures. The extant scholarship also shows how talk around the process of documentation mandates a balancing act between client participation and strict adherence to forms to ensure transparency and accountability (Matarese and Caswell, 2018). Employing the framework of strategic interaction (Goffman, 1969, p. 10), this study contributes to the current understanding by showing that interaction unfolds strategically around digital technology as exemplified by the digital CV, depending on the perceived vulnerability of the client. Strict adherence to the digital CV format ensures the transparency of social work, tests client self-representations and reveals vulnerabilities or hidden resources that can be strategically deployed to rework client attitudes towards the labour market and further help the client as well as attain organisational goals. However, this focus implies the risk of neglecting the social difficulties and complexities that make clients vulnerable. Conversely, the divergence of social workers from the prescribed rules and procedures could

benefit their clients but could also compromise the organisationally required digital documentation and transparency of social work.

The current body of research describes acts of resistance through which social workers bend and reshape established social work procedures to benefit their clients. Resistance is described through notions such as rogue social workers (Weinberg and Banks, 2019, p. 372), positive deviant social work (Carey and Foster, 2011, p. 578) and disruptive social work (Feldman, 2022, p. 760). This paper contributes to the literature as an empirical analysis of the practices of bending and reshaping established social work procedures in the context of using digital information technology within structurally impinged welfare encounters. It evinces that social workers engaged with the most vulnerable clients may attempt to avoid, adapt or bend established procedures for use of the digital technology to perform positive deviant social work (Carey and Foster, 2011, p. 587). The present study indicates a dilemma of the technology's suitability: It is apt for clients who are less vulnerable and whose attitudes towards the labour market can be reworked, but it is inapt for the most vulnerable clients, for whom the digital documentation of their vulnerable identity does not yield results. The present paper used the concept of expression games (Goffman, 1969, p. 10) to elucidate that social workers strategically select information to be recorded and used depending on the vulnerability of their clients. In such acts, social workers choose when to test the self-representation of the clients and when to control documented information. The digital CV is not a passive tool and must be regarded as both a constraining and enabling aspect of the welfare encounter. Hence, social workers interact with the digital tool strategically through e.g. resistance or mental reworking of clients' attitudes.

This study acknowledges the inextricability of the problems and potentials of digitalisation Click or tap here to enter text.and endeavours to transcend positive and negative assessments of technology (Nordesjö et al., 2022, Steiner, 2021). Employing the framework of expression games in strategic interaction, this paper contributes to the literature on the digitalisation of social work through a novel conceptualisation and apprehension of how social workers use digital information technologies in their work. Nevertheless, the study is limited by its focus on interactions being strategic, which could create a bias towards the opinion that welfare encounters and social workers are overly strategic. However, this study's focus on strategic interaction highlights manners, in which digitalisation in social work impels social workers to act strategically in response to constraining factors of the welfare context. Therefore, the focus on strategic interactions represents a limitation of the study but also reflects the current, digitalisation-driven change in

social work and welfare services at large. Digital tools are not passive and should be regarded as part of the constraining and defining structures of welfare encounters and social work. Prospective research initiatives could use this framework to examine other ways in which digitalisation instigates strategic interactions in social work.

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Article 2:

Heroes, victims and resisters: agentic vulnerability and techniques of identity talk in digitalised job centres

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Abstract

This article explores vulnerable clients' techniques of identity talk, drawing on interviews with clients in Danish job centres. We combine the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism with the sociology of nothing to explore techniques of disidentification from the non-worker identity. The study demonstrates how the actors perform agentic vulnerability to resolve their identity dilemmas. We identify three techniques of identity talk: hero-talk to reassert their hard worker identity, victim-talk to excuse their current positions and resister-talk through commissive and omissive responses to digital demands and requirements. The latter involves different forms of negational action: doing something, non-doing and doing nothing.

Introduction

Public service institutions provide settings within which vulnerable clients are faced with contrasting demands for exhibiting both agency within their cases (Mik-Meyer and Haugaard 2021) and vulnerability to be eligible for welfare benefits (Mitchell 2020). Danish job centres provide an example of one such institution in which this dilemma plays out, in the context of vast digital development. The institutional culture of Danish job centres has been transformed by technological developments that enrol clients in a system of extensive digital requirements. Vulnerable people who attend job centres are often living in complex social situations involving not only unemployment but also economic instability, disabilities, mental health issues and other social struggles. Digital forms, tools and requirements govern their encounters with professionals and contact with the job centre. Clients cannot afford to resist these requirements overtly, as failure to comply can result in a reduction of their welfare benefits (Caswell, Eskelinen and Olesen 2013). In this institutional setting, clients find themselves in the position having to negotiate their identities (Gubrium and Holstein 2001).

One means of practising this is identity work. This is often performed by people experiencing stigmatisation, in an attempt to salvage a sense of self-worth and dignity (Snow and Anderson 1987). Identity work can be accomplished through verbal techniques of identity talk (Snow and Anderson 1987). In the context of this study, unemployment may be considered a stigmatising 'blemish of character', insofar as it threatens to discredit some identity claims the actors may wish to make, such as being diligent and hardworking. Stigma creates a dramaturgically 'spoiled identity', deviating from the normative standards of a given society or social group (Goffman 1963). Identity talk may thus be understood as the attempt to reconcile an actor's virtual and actual selves (Goffman 1963): their publicly perceived social front and their privately felt personal identity.

Further identity dilemmas arise when actors experience a loss of valued social roles, such as an employment position, and find themselves in a situation where multiple and contradictory identities are at play (Goffman 1963, Charmaz 1994). To manage this dramaturgical concern of reconciling contradictory identities and aligning themselves with normative standards, individuals might offer narrative accounts to explain their situation (Goffman 1963:14,133). If the actor succeeds in providing the 'right' corrective story, they may reclaim social worth, save face and disavow discrediting features of their identity (Goffman 1963:134).

This article contributes to studies of identity work by examining how vulnerable unemployed clients manage the identity dilemma of performing both agency and vulnerability in the institutional context of digitalised public services, namely the job centre. Previous studies of identity work have considered many vulnerable groups, such as the homeless (Gonyea and Melekis 2017; Padgett 2021), gamblers (Wagner et al. 2017), asylum seekers (Cuthill 2017) welfare claimants (Jarvinen and Mik-Meyer 2003, Caswell et al. 2013) and survivors of domestic violence (Dunn 2005; FitzPatrick et al. 2019; Leisenring 2006). As the digitalisation of society increases, studies of identity work reveal how digital technologies shape techniques and processes of identity work. These include, for instance, using social media platforms (Caluzzi, Pennay, and Livingston 2022; Hammond and Cooper 2015), interacting in online environments (Maratea and Kavanaugh 2012; Smith, Wickes, and Underwood 2015; Tatch 2022) and gaming (Buyukozturk 2022; Lee and Lin 2011). Other research recognises that new and existing inequalities can be reinscribed through unequal access to and ability to navigate the digital technologies necessary for social participation in society (van Deursen and van Dijk 2019; Helsper and Reisdorf 2017; Robinson 2018). For example, the introduction of self-service solutions to welfare provision, such as applying for benefits online, attending to digital mail, and filling out various forms, presupposes clients' agentic engagement with digital requirements. Those who lack such capabilities and resources may feel that they are being pushed further back into disadvantage and marginalisation (Schou and Pors 2019). However, recent research suggests that digitalisation has a more complex and dualistic impact, creating both opportunities and disadvantages for users (Nordesjö, Scaramuzzino and Ulmestig 2022; Steiner 2021).

Research into identity work using digital technologies has tended to focus on leisure lifestyles, subcultures, social media and young people. There is a comparable lack of research into how vulnerable groups perform identity work in response to digital technologies, particularly in the context of public service institutions. In this article, we explore how clients respond to the technological infrastructure of the job centre, such as self-service solutions, to manage the dramaturgical identity dilemmas arising from their positions. Drawing on the sociology of nothing, we argue that these actors perform negational practices of identity work by dis-identifying with the unwanted role of being unemployed. We begin with a review of empirical studies of identity dilemmas, before presenting our analytical framework, which brings together ideas from symbolic interactionism and the sociology of nothing. Using this framework, we then present our findings, highlighting the techniques of identity talk through which participants

perform agentic vulnerability. We argue that these clients created a hybridised strategy of agentic vulnerability, by combining expressions of both agency and vulnerability. This helped them to manage the identity dilemmas arising from their stigmatised positions.

Managing deviant and stigmatised identities through agentic vulnerability

Identity dilemmas may occur when actors seek to claim contrasting identity positions that produce a role conflict, such as that between agency and victimisation. Charmaz (1994) describes identity dilemmas as the loss of previously acknowledged and personally felt positive identities, which results in attempts to retain lost identities and reconcile new identity positions. Asserting a victim identity can prove problematic in this respect, as it threatens to undermine personal agency (Wagner et al. 2017). One solution to this is to display a 'survivor' identity, which suggests agency while distancing the actor from the stigma of being a victim (Dunn and Creek 2015). Claiming contrasting identity positions may result in what Dunn and Creek (2015:264) call 'blended identity', which combines devalued and valued identity constructions to reconcile the conflicting demands of situations. Such identity dilemmas can arise in resistance to institutionally defined identities, insofar as the templates provided may only allow one role.

People seeking help from public services are often encouraged to make sense of their problems in the form of the institutionally preferred 'formula story' that transforms their identity into something that can be managed by the institution (Loseke 2001). However, actors may attempt to escape this organisational formula story (Loseke 2001; Mik-Meyer and Haugaard 2021) and write another of their own. For example, in their study of homeless shelters, Mik-Meyer and Hauggaard (2021) observed a strategy of hybrid resistance, whereby welfare claimants oscillated between collaborative compliance and resistant disavowal of client identities. In her study of vulnerable welfare claimants, Mitchell (2020) finds that clients may adopt agentic strategies to perform vulnerability by conforming to institutional demands and thereby achieving eligibility for welfare benefits.

Recent discussions of spoiled identities seek to extend analysis beyond the micro level, reflecting macro forces of structural power. Re-evaluating Goffman's notion of spoiled identity, Tyler (2020) and Charmaz (2019) propose to situate stigma within a broader, structural context. Following this, other scholars have explored the constraints of structural power dynamics upon actors' felt sense of agency and 'stigma power' (Link and Phelan 2001; Müller 2020). Empirical

studies within this vein reconceptualise stigma in relation to social class, socio-economic arrangements and intersectionality, emphasising the macro-structural factors that shape vulnerability and stigma (Alexandrescu and Spicer 2023; Chatzitheochari and Butler-Rees 2023). For instance, Thomas (2021) argues for the need to rethink the concept of stigma to include structures of power, inequality and resistance alongside its interactional properties. Studying parents of disabled children, Thomas (2021) reveals how they reimagine normative scripts of disability in public interactions as well as in institutional contexts, thus resisting some aspects of structural stigma.

At the micro-level, scholars point to the impact of identity dilemmas on social relations and mundane encounters. For example, Banister et al (2019) argued that non-drinkers employed techniques of both neutralization and affirmation to manage the impact of others' negative evaluations on their self-identities. This resonates with recent calls to pay more attention to personal stories of struggle, or 'getting by' in everyday life (Back 2015; Mitchell 2020). It also supports criticisms of the assumption that vulnerable groups lack agency (Mik-Meyer and Haugaard 2021). On the contrary, those in precarious organisational positions may demonstrate agency as they negotiate their institutional trajectories, reject institutional formula stories that contradict their self-identities (Mik-Meyer and Haugaard 2021), and manage complex or ambivalent role-status dilemmas. In the context of the Danish job centres, we shall see how clients manage such ambivalent role-status dilemmas by performing agentic vulnerability through techniques of identity talk.

Analytical framework: narrative identities, accounts and non-identity

Stories reflect the wider social order in which they are produced and read (Plummer 1995:19). As Gubrium and Holstein (2001:7) put it: We 'talk ourselves into being' through social interaction in the course of everyday life. Narrative identities are composed through a selection and ordering of events into a coherent biographical plotline that helps us make sense of our lives (Järvinen 2001; McAdams 2011; Plummer 1995). Such stories may contain literary character types, such as victims, villains and heroes (McAdams 1993).

Storytelling is also a communicative act: selves are performed, told and shared through interpersonal encounters. Identity talk is an everyday 'form' of discourse (Goffman 1981), involving verbal patterns and techniques that serve to construct and manage (dis)claimed social

roles. Identity talk techniques are particularly important in giving accounts of deviant behaviour and can be used to negotiate the meaning of unwanted attributions (Snow and Anderson 1987). For example, Goffman (1963) discussed how stigmatised individuals engaged in conversational strategies of information control, selective disclosure and 'passing'.

Narrative accounts therefore serve a performative function, by reconciling private and public aspects of selfhood and aligning questionable identities with normative ideals. This involves dramaturgical techniques of self-presentation and impression management aimed at deviance disavowal (Goffman 1959). For example, actors may employ excuses and justifications (Scott and Lyman 1968) or techniques of neutralisation (Sykes and Matza 1957) to create symbolic distance between themselves and an unwanted role. One technique of neutralisation is 'condemnation of the condemners', whereby the narrator admits to a deviant act but asserts that those who accused them are equally guilty of such (or even worse) deviance (Sykes and Matza 1957: 668).

The cultural fabric of 'institutional arrangements' (Goffman 1961) creates the conditions that require such accounts and the practices that constrain them (Gubrium and Holstein 2001). This can shape the way that members tell stories, as certain narrative forms are (im)possible, (dis)preferred and (un)recognised. For example, Goffman (1961) argued that role dispossession, whereby a previous status (such as being employed) is taken away, can lead people to tell either 'sad tales', which blame external circumstances and demonstrate regret, or 'apologias', which defend the actor's face through alignment with moral codes. Pestello (1991) observed several techniques of 'discounting', including 'exception', which frames the deviance as an aberration from a usual non-deviant character, and 'coercion', which attributes a person's behaviour to factors out of their control.

The sociology of nothing (Scott 2018, 2019, 2020) provides a helpful theoretical framework to explore these ideas further. This concerns the realm of negative social phenomena: symbolic objects that are empirically non-existent but still subjectively meaningful. These include no-things, no-bodies, non-events and no-where places. In this study, we explore negatively formed, or 'non-'identities, based on the clients' identity work to disengage from unwanted roles and statuses. Such attempts to create 'role distance' (Goffman 1972) can exhibit subtle resistive stances, such as attempts to symbolically remove themselves from social situations (Scott 2018). This can be accomplished through either *acts of commission*, with motives of refusal, rejection, disengagement and disavowal, or *acts of omission*, involving neglect, irrelevance or unawareness (Scott 2019: 13) Respectively, people may talk about actively choosing to 'do nothing' and dis-

identify with a role (commissive acts), or passively 'non-doing' through a lack of meaningful engagement (omissive acts) (Scott 2020). The study of negatively formed identities contributes towards broader sociological projects to explore the domains of the latent, unmarked and taken-for-granted (Brekhus 1998, 2015; Zerubavel 2015).

Methodology

Research setting

There are 94 job centres in Denmark, which help unemployed people into work, education or job training (Sølvsteen 2018). In June 2022, 73,300 people are estimated to be unemployed, which comprises 2.4 % of the workforce aged 16-66; of these, 21.4 % are long-term unemployed (Ministry of Finance 2022: 119, 122). Job centre clients are considered 'vulnerable' if they struggle with physical, mental and social problems besides unemployment (Benjaminsen et al. 2018; Danneris 2018). Research shows that the longer vulnerable clients stay on public benefits, the harder it is to exit the public support system (Nielsen et al. 2021; Væksthusets Forskningscenter 2019). Compared to the EU's average unemployment rate, Denmark has lower rates of unemployment. However, in comparison with other Nordic countries, the Danish unemployment rate is relatively high (Department of Employment 2020:26).

The Danish public sector has been subject to extensive digitalisation efforts, making Danish citizens some of the most digitalised in the world (Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2020). As a result, there is a cultural expectation that Danish citizens are able to navigate an array of self-services, such as digital mail, digital ID, and digital systems of organisations, such as hospitals, schools and job centres etc. However, the structural reality may be quite different. In the summer of 2022, a Danish newspaper issued an article series on *The digital underclass* (Politiken 2022), remarking that the digitalisation of Danish society has brought about the development of a 'digital underclass' of people who cannot sufficiently understand and follow digital developments. This category was estimated to comprise 20-25 % of the Danish population and was not limited to vulnerable citizens (Politiken 2022). In this context, the digitalised job centre provides an interesting case to examine how members perform their identities.

Data collection

This study draws on 17 interviews with unemployed Danish people aged between 28 and 66, who, at the time of interviewing, were enrolled at their local job centres. They were considered vulnerable, as they experienced mental, physical or/and social difficulties in addition to long-term unemployment. The interviews were conducted by the first author as part of her doctoral research. She recruited participants via social workers, who forwarded an invitation letter to their clients, and approached clients during her observations at the Danish job centres. The length of the interviews ranged between 29-104 minutes, with an average of 65 minutes.

As this project was carried out during the Covid-19 pandemic, throughout periods of lockdown, the interviews were held by telephone, while during the partial re-opening of society, the interviews were conducted face-to-face. When conducting telephone interviews, one has to pay attention to the missing non-verbal communication, which can impede building rapport between the interviewer and interviewee (Sturges and Hanrahan 2004; Trier-Bieniek 2012). However, when interviewing people on sensitive topics, telephone interviewing can offer more anonymity and grant access to people who might otherwise be reluctant to participate (Sturges and Hanrahan 2004; Trier-Bieniek 2012). With this in mind, the first author endeavoured to provide supportive verbal acknowledgements of continued listening.

All interviews were conducted in the Danish language and subsequently transcribed, including paralinguistic communicative gestures. The selected quotations for analysis have been translated into English as closely to the original wording as possible, including equivalents of slang and proverbs, and spoken emphasis is shown by italics. All interviewees' names have been anonymised using pseudonyms.

The study adhered to the ethical standards of the Danish Code of Conduct for Researcher Integrity (Ministry of Higher Education and Science 2014) and the British Sociological Association (BSA 2017), and the project gained ethical approval by the home institution of the first author. The data have been processed and stored securely according to General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR). Upon initial contact with the clients, the first author negotiated informed consent, taking care to emphasise that the research was not connected to their case record at the job centre, and that there was no implied pressure or obligation to participate. The interviewees were made aware that they could retract any parts of the interview and decline to answer any questions if they felt uncomfortable.

Analytical approach

The general analytical approach of the study was guided by the principles of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2014). Using the strategies of initial coding and line-by-line coding (Charmaz 2014:124ff), the first author examined the interviews individually, aiming to retain the richness of the data, verbatim flow of conversation and attend to the narrative identities that interviewees composed in the dialogical exchange with the interviewer. This process was informed by symbolic interactionist ideas of identity negotiation and accounting techniques.

The coding strategy revealed that clients shifted between different modes of self-presentation that resembled literary figures or characters. They also used verbal accounting techniques to control their self-presentation. The resulting set of codes was grouped into categories, which revealed three broad techniques of identity talk (Snow and Anderson 1987) in the clients' accounts. In the following section, we identify and discuss these techniques, through which actors presented themselves as heroes, victims and resisters. These techniques suggested ways of responding to the identity dilemmas of their stigmatised positions through the performance of agentic vulnerability.

Findings: Three techniques of identity talk

Clients told different stories about their experiences of being unemployed and enrolled at the job centre. Navigating an ambivalent path between agentic and vulnerable role-statuses, they discursively positioned themselves as having more or less power and choice in relation to the structural constraints of the institutional setting. Their narrative accounts revealed a range of techniques through which they made identity claims, sometimes 'working up' a positively avowed attribute, such as being hard-working, and sometimes 'working down' a deviant, disavowed stigma (cf. Potter 1996), such as being unemployed. In so doing, they combined agentic and vulnerable stances to manage the identity dilemmas that arise from loss of the valued worker identity and the contrasting institutional demands for clients of public services to exhibit both agency and vulnerability in order to be eligible for welfare benefits. The clients' narrative accounts thus revealed a hybridised strategy of agentic vulnerability through which they could reconcile their identity dilemmas in three ways. In the following, we present the findings in three sections each presenting a distinct identity talk technique: 1) hero-talk, 2) victim-talk, and 3) resister-talk. In the latter, we further identify subtypes of negational action: doing something, doing nothing

and non-doing. These identity talk techniques were not mutually exclusive, however, as clients shifted between them to perform agentic vulnerability.

The Hero: an exceptional episode in a hard worker narrative

The clients presented themselves as heroic characters who struggled against adversity. Their tales emphasised their previous employment status and hardworking career, from which the current state of unemployment was a temporary exception. By making claims to have been a conscientious 'workaholic' (Lilli), 'slaving away' (Tina), they worked up moral qualities to distance themselves from the unwanted identity of a non-worker. One way of doing this was to recount a high workload, such as '45 plus hours a week' (Linda), '40 hours or 50 hours' (Tim), '37 plus hours' (Nina), all of which exceeded the amount of maximum 37 work hours per week set by Danish labour market regulations. Another way of positively avowing their heroic worker identity was to play out this role in antagonistic relation to villainous characters, such as the job centre professionals and previous bosses. We see such heroic struggle in Lilli's story:

I: Now this is a bit of a big question again, but I am thinking: What does it mean 'to work', what does it mean to you?

Lilli: Previously I was a workaholic. It means a great deal to me and my identity, right?

I: Can you explain a bit about that?

Lilli: Well, in the past, I was a waitress. Then I worked at an office. Besides working at an office I also had my waitress job, so I have always had three-four jobs at a time. So it has always been my - well, as I say, my identity, that I have been a workaholic. So from one day to the other, I could not. I don't even think I can take on ordinary fulltime employment anymore. It is a sense of failure for me not being able to work anymore. I am starting from point zero. This is where I must fight to get back up again. Because now it is not my identity anymore. Now it is Lilli, the welfare benefit claimant. That's not great, right? My working life really, really means a lot to me.

Lilli's response to the interviewer's 'big question' was to define her unemployed status as an exception (Pestello 1991:36). Although she acknowledged the vulnerable label of 'Lilli, welfare benefit claimant', she pitted this against her otherwise 'workaholic' identity that worked 'three-four jobs at a time'. Depicting her fight from the starting 'point zero', she employed hero-talk to

work up a sense of self-worth. Thus, Lilli created the 'right' corrective story (Goffman 1963:134) to defend a positively avowed status. In response to the role dispossession, she had experienced by losing her core identity as a hard worker, she offered an apologia (Goffman 1961: 139) to morally align her self-construction with the values of the audience. She thereby distanced and commissively dis-identified herself from the unemployed identity and the stigmatising effects this might entail.

Similarly, Tina avowed the hard-working identity by urging that employment 'means everything' because 'you are a *completely different* person when you have a job. Also because you enjoy it more when you are off work. (I: okay.) Also, I feel like it is more *legal* [small laugh] when you have a job, than when you are unemployed'. Another client, Linda, explained: 'Well, [to work] means a lot. It is a sensitive topic for me because there is some of my identity in it. I grew up with having to take care of myself. I moved out at 16. I have always fended for myself'. A third client, Nina, said, 'the last two years, before I got fired, I have had two weeks of vacation in two years. So I have really been working. A lot'. A final example from Liam illustrates the narrative form of these stories, with their scenes of high drama and mythical tropes (McAdams, 1993):

Interviewer: Yes. What does it mean to work? What does it mean to you?

Liam: It means everything… I was raised with that even if you are feeling bad or are sick, you have to work it off. And that is what I've been doing. (I: okay) because anything else is not worth anything. (I: okay) So it hit me hard with all of these flaws I have acquired. And that I cannot work full time. So I have actually fought, yes, for now 16 years, to show that I can and want to [work]. That I have been able to get to 15 hours [of work per week], that is pretty big. (I: Yes, certainly.) But it has cost me blood, sweat and tears. It has. So it means everything. And I know that I have a job when I am through all of this paperwork and through the job centre. When it is all in order, then, I can get out of the job centre.

Here, we see components of the hero's adventure story (Campbell 1949): the villain of the job centre, the hero that fights, the lost working identity and the exceptional state of being unemployed. The narrator, as the protagonist, tells a proud tale about their agentic acts: their quest to seek the moral status of a devoted hard worker means keeping a disdainful distance from the face threat caused by unemployment. Thus, clients may resolve their identity dilemmas by marking a sharp contrast between: commissively rejecting the stigmatising effects of the unemployed identity while positively claiming the status of a hard-worker. Thus, the clients

performed agentic vulnerability by displaying and emphasising a heroic hard-working identity position amidst a constraining, vulnerable but role-distant situation.

The Victim: sad tales of sickness and tragic misfortune

Clients also responded to their identity dilemma by focusing on their vulnerable status. Victim-talk involved speaking about difficult and challenging episodes in their lives, framing them as externally imposed causes of suffering. These narratives adopted a passive, helpless stance of having been subjected to forces beyond their control (Pestello 1961). Like hero-talk, this technique created role distance (Goffman 1972) between their authentic actor selves and their current, situated status as non-workers (cf. Chriss 1999). These victim stories exhibited agentic performances of vulnerability (cf. Mitchell 2020), serving to exonerate the person from moral blame and institutional expectations of self-driven change. One way of doing this was to talk about a physical illness or injury that caused problems in everyday life:

> I am in my fifties and I am educated in housekeeping and I have a problem. I have a slipped disc that cannot be operated on (Tina).

> I was in my thirties when I was pregnant with my daughter. And it showed that I had cancer while I was pregnant (Linda).

> I am in my sixties. I am waiting on an early pension to go through because I have troubles with my weight, I have lost 20 kg, and then I have COPD (Tim).

> I am disabled. Well, I have been educated as a craftsman, in carpentry. But I cannot do that anymore because I have lost one of my legs (Ian).

Telling 'sad tales' (Goffman 1961:141) of externally imposed suffering served as an excuse, by accepting the actor's deviant status but denying their personal responsibility (Scott and Lyman 1968). For example, participants might claim that their illness had created logistical barriers that had prevented them from working or taking on employment, such as difficulties in accessing public transport. These small banal dramas (Mitchell 2020:227) of everyday life positioned the clients as victims of circumstance, battling forces outside of their control (Pestello 1991:33). In turn, this framed their non-working as an act of omission (Scott 2019), which had arisen unintentionally and limited their working potential.

Apart from the tales of chronic illness, there were also more extreme tales about death. This may reflect Goffman's (1959) technique of dramatic realization, whereby actors highlight and emphasise certain stylised or role-typical attributes of a presented character. They gave their role performances in a hyperbolic style to strengthen their claim to the desired identity - in this case, the hard worker they had intended to be. For example, Lars told about experiencing his best friend dying in his arms, Linda described how she could die if she did not watch her food and vitamin intake, Tim explained how he could die from COVID-19 due to his troubles with his lungs, Zenia expressed how she would rather die than go back to her home country, and Liam disclosed how he had attempted suicide.

These claims were sometimes bolstered by the use of medical terminology, which positioned the actor as a patient within a medical frame. For example, Linda spoke about 'surrendering at the doctor's', gave detailed explanations of her 'tachycardia' and 'AV block', and emphasised the imminent risk of mortality, being 'almost ready to pop my clogs'. She used these discursive tools to tell of her experiences with the digital system at the job centre which resulted in a medical explanation of her situation:

Interviewer: Okay, and how about booking meetings [online]? Is it something you do yourself, or do you receive it by digital mail, or how does that happen?

Linda: Well, I haven't been booked into meetings through digital mail. I have only had, well, I have had two meetings with [social worker]. […] I am the type of person who wants - I really want [to work]. So, I tend to say yes to something that my doctor might think is a bad idea. And then I said that it might be a good idea to have him in to give advice. Because I have maybe, well, he said, and it was maybe a bit harsh, but he said that I will never get healthy even though I have this dream about [laughing while saying] that someone will come around with a magic wand and say 'Ta da! Now you are healthy!' [both laugh softly]. And he is a bit tough like that and tells me things, that I do not want to admit. That I just don't have the same energy as before. And not the same, well, I might have a lot of resources but well… The thing about the energy, because my body goes up and down and it is just not there and I have to be attentive to that so I don't get admitted again, again, again. With something regarding my heart. Or numbers that are completely screwed up, right?

Here, Linda invoked the authority of the medical profession to legitimate her current position as a non-worker. She then built upon this with a 'sad tale' (Goffman 1961) by expressing her unattainable dream of being healthy again. She perceived her future social participation as limited, acknowledging that she would probably not return to work, 'never get healthy' or 'have the same energy as before'. Victim-talk, then, is employed to claim an omissive status position through sad tales of sickness and tragic misfortune. Through victim-talk, clients perform agentic vulnerability by emphasising their vulnerable position; this serves to disavow the stigmatising effects of the unemployed identity by attributing it to forces outside their control.

The Resister: commissive and omissive engagement with technology

Finally, clients performed agentic vulnerability through their responses to the digitalised infrastructure of the job centre. We call this identity talk technique 'resister-talk', borrowing an in-vivo term that was used by one participant. In her interview, Rose referred to herself and others like her as 'us, the resisters' of the increasing digitalisation of society. She emphasised her position as someone who actively refrained from and rejected digital use within institutional and domestic contexts. Her account contained examples of how she did not use smartphones, was not 'hooked on the internet' and preferred the 'good old landline'. Across the empirical dataset, this identity talk technique corresponded to both commissive and omissive forms of negational social action. Sometimes, this created opportunities to exhibit subtle resistive stances through role distance. Actors resolved the same identity dilemma in different ways, which often went unnoticed and unmarked. Below, we discuss three subtypes of resister-talk. Again, these techniques were distinct but not mutually exclusive, as clients sometimes drew upon more than one to perform agentic vulnerability.

Doing something: Digital diligence

The first strategy of commissively 'doing something' was shown by clients who attempted to do all the required work diligently and present the personal front (Goffman 1959) of a well-prepared client. Paradoxically, this strategy was employed to positively work up the unemployed status, by regarding it as a transient stage in a longer-term career trajectory towards future job security. Clients would describe how they had dutifully complied with the requirements of the system,

engaging with digital technologies as a purposeful activity. This resonates with previous research that emphasises that clients may perform strategies of hybrid resistance through both collaborative compliance and resistance towards organisational requirements (Mik-Meyer and Haugaard 2021). For example, Tina checked the database for potential jobs every day, even during the time of the Covid-19 lockdown when new jobs were scarce. She explained 'I check every single day. I have all of the job agents, and then I also search on the Jobnet [a job centre-specific website]'. She added that even though she did not have to fulfil the requirement of actively looking for a job, she still did so. Her diligent search for jobs extended into her everyday consumption of mass media: 'It can be if I am watching telly or reading something. […] And then I look [in the newspaper] if I can find any place that… any new places that are opening, in food or something. And it is in the newspaper. So, I would call them and ask if they would be interested in receiving my CV'. During the interview, Tina referred to her CV to evidence her answers, for example, explaining in detail how many courses she had taken throughout the years to master digital tools and acquire relevant skills for job applications. She was always well-prepared before attending case meetings at the job centre and persevered with these practices, even when she doubted whether they were helpful or felt they did not make sense:

> Interviewer: […] Okay, so you access the CV [online]. And is it something with you having to activate it in there [on the job centre website], or how is it?

> Tina: Yes, so if I e.g. have been on a course. Now I have not been in any internships, but I would get in there and write as if I have been in one, and about the course and something like that. You have to keep it updated all the time […] Also, because it is built up weirdly, on the job centre site, it is a weird and awkward way of doing it. (I: okay) You have to take it down before it can be uploaded [on the job centre site] again. It takes so long. […] And it does not even look nice in there. You know, like your own, it is chronological, you know. But it looks messy in there [on the job centre site] […] You know, I am not the only one who says that; a lot of us do. Is it really worth it spending so much energy on it on Jobnet, because does it work? Is it not better that we spend our energy on our own CV? [...] I know I am not supposed to say it, but we all know how it works. It is just a controlling institution [the job centre]. They control that you apply for two jobs a week and then Tina can get her benefits again.

In the above, Tina gave a detailed description of the diligent digital work she was doing, despite holding private reservations about the laborious design and controlling features of the system.

Tina complied with the organisational requirements by taking on all of the tasks required to present the public front of a diligent client. However, she privately refrained from using digital organisational tools, such as the online CV, in her job search. She kept a hidden scepticism towards the organisational demands and their utility, only disclosing her critical attitudes to the researcher and others in her position. Tina justified her sentiments by aligning herself with others, for example, by adding comments such as, 'I am not the only one who says that; a lot of us do'. This strategy of compliant non-use displays a dramaturgical skill of juggling the performative front of a publicly visible role with a contradictory, 'cynical' (Goffman 1959) disbelief in its demands.

Doing nothing: acts of rejection

A second commissive strategy of 'doing nothing' found expression in purposefully avoiding the use of digital technologies, such as email, job search websites and online skills training courses. By agentically refusing, avoiding and hiding from the digital surveillant gaze, the clients managed to symbolically remove themselves from the situation and create role distance from their unwanted identities. For example, Tim told the story of waiting for an early pension to go through. He presented himself as 'almost exempt from applying for jobs', which, in practice, is not actually an option at the job centre. Tim opted to receive physical letters instead of the job centre's preferred use of digital mail. He provided the following explanation for his choice:

Interviewer: And what about the contact to the job centre? How has that been? …

Tim: I get letters. I do not have digital mail. (I: yes?) Because now I have had a couple of computers, and then sometimes it catches a virus. That was what happened to the old load of shit, that I had. And then, the job centre, when they send something to me, if I had to go in for a meeting, so they started by subtracting 500 Danish crowns a day because I could not roll up for a meeting because I could not get in there [on the digital mail] and check. So I chose that now I just want letters instead. By [physical] mail. I got a whole new computer last year. My kids gave me one. I do not use it a whole lot. I send e-mails, but digital mail I do not have. The public services watch us, and then you get the punishment of subtraction [of money from benefits]. I am on public benefit, right? 500 Danish crowns a day is a lot of money for me. (I: It is certainly.) So that is why I get

[physical] mail instead of digital mail. When you cannot trust your computer. I could maybe today, but I let it be. It works well enough for me'.

Tim's narrative assemblage of events accounted for his commissive refusal of digital work despite having the means to perform it. He simply did nothing to alert the job centre about his newly acquired computer and, therefore, his restored ability to engage with the digital requirements, such as digital mail, again. He accounted for this deviance by 'condemning the condemners' (Sykes and Matza 1957) for their surveillance of him as a Danish citizen, using this claim to legitimise his refusal to comply. These villainous figures included the job centre staff who were in charge of his case, the welfare benefits system, and the wider economic constraints upon this public service.

Tim also described his subjective, lived experience of being at the job centre and the negative emotions this evoked. He spoke of being 'bored to death' and finding the activities 'deadly dull':

Interviewer: I am thinking, applying for two jobs a week, have you always had to do that?

Tim: Yeah, but it is some years ago now that I stopped with all of that nonsense. Because it is always the same, and then once I did a course. Six hours a day it was, and they were all the same jobs in there, right? So it was deadly dull.

Interviewer: But what do you do if there were all the same jobs in there? What do you do?

Tim: You cannot do anything else than apply for the same jobs again and again, every time. And nothing happened. It was nothing other than a waste of time. That is my opinion anyway.

Tim's talk expressed being caught in a repetitive loop of applying for the same kinds of jobs without any prospect of career development. This suspended him in boredom, 'nothing other than a waste of time' and what felt like 'nonsense'. By resisting participation in the digital tasks duties and requirements of his position as a client, Tim removed himself from the digital machinery of the job centre.

Non-doing: non-appearing acts

Clients employed an omissive strategy of non-doing when they preferred to remain in anonymous positions without taking action. They did not consciously reject the influence of digital technology in their everyday lives, but simply did not care for it and made little effort to engage. Some of

these clients did not have a home computer with internet access, for economic or specific personal reasons, and they did not miss it. Lilli's story revealed an unintentional practice of non-involvement and passive non-appearance at the job centre, for example by neglecting to check her email or using an omissive strategy of minimal engagement:

> I must admit, because of my stress, I can cope with the top five lines and then yeah. What it says down at the bottom, I have no idea. I only read the first four-five lines, So if anything important is further down, then I do not see it.

> Yeah, my plan is, that I want to do flexible hours, because I do not think I can take on a full-time employment anymore. So that is my plan. He [social worker] has also sent me something, but it is again on the digital mail. I have not read it. I do not know what he is writing. So right now, I don ot feel like there is a plan of action, it can be that the municipality has one, but I do not know what it is. I do not have a plan myself.

Lilli perceived herself as unengaged in relation to the job centre; she ignored and skim-read the letters she received and neglected to follow up on any 'plan of action'. She legitimised her neglectful stance and inability to act on self-service solutions through her stress diagnosis. Similarly, in her everyday use of digital technology, Lilli described herself as a 'typical lurker' as she observed: 'I look at what the others have written. I do not post anything myself. Very, very rarely, anyway. So I just lurk on what others write'. Thus, she ended up in a position of relative invisibility, in both the institutional and domestic realms. Such non-engagement, however, may have reduced Lilli's opportunities to participate in society by impeding her further progress through the job centre system. This resonates with previous research showing that those unable to navigate digital requirements such as self-service solutions may be pushed further into disadvantage (Shou and Pors 2019). In response to the interviewer's question about what she could use the job centre for, she replied:

> Lilli: ... Honestly, not a bit.

> Interviewer: Yes, will you explain a bit more about that?

> Lilli: [Laughs] It is an institution I have to contact to get money as I do not have a job. They do not help with getting further. So honestly, not a bit. Other than it is an institution I have to contact to get my money, I cannot see. Last time, yes, I got an internship and got a job, so it was the job centre that fixed that. But I do not think, I think it is chitchat, and then they call again in a month. So I do not think, I can use them for anything.

Thus, Lilli passively neglected to appear. She consigned the job centre to a small part of her life that just called once a month. Simultaneously, however, this extract shows her underlying irritation with the social 'chitchat' of the job centre, which she perceived as slowing the forward movement of her case as it progressed through the system. The non-doing strategy, therefore, allowed clients to remove themselves from their unwanted positions as unemployed clients through omissive non-engagement and neglect. However, this came at the cost of creating limitations and constrictions to their administrative case.

Discussion and conclusion

The findings show that vulnerable clients perform agentic vulnerability by employing techniques of identity talk. These help them to resolve the identity dilemmas that arise from lost working identities and contrasting institutional demands for agency and vulnerability. We have identified three distinct, but not mutually exclusive, techniques by which the actors reconciled such dilemmas.

First, clients could employ hero-talk to work up the narrative of a past hard-working self and disavow the non-worker identity. Through hero-talk the clients commissively disidentified with the unemployed role, discursively explaining their current position through an apologia which defined their non-working status as an exception. Second, clients could employ victim-talk to create role distance between themselves and their unemployed role. They emphasised their vulnerability, legitimating their current position as a non-worker through tales of sickness and tragedy. Through victim-talk, clients presented the non-working status as an unintentional event in their lives, thereby omissively claiming a passive identity position of vulnerability. Third, clients employed three types of resister-talk, through commissive and omissive responses to the digital arrangements of the job centre. When commissively 'doing something', clients displayed diligence, by complying with the digital requirements while not actually using these solutions in their private job searches. When commissively 'doing nothing', clients sought to distance themselves from the unemployed role by agentically refusing institutional digital work. Thus, they symbolically removed themselves from the unwanted identity position. Finally, omissive 'non-doing' revealed a lack of engagement, through neglecting to notice or respond to digital requirements. However, this omissive invisibility came at the cost of limiting opportunities for social participation and administrative case progression.

These three techniques of identity talk helped to resolve the identity dilemmas that arise when individuals seek to claim agentic and vulnerable stances simultaneously, having suffered the loss of their previous, positively valued work identities (Charmaz 1994; Dunn and Creek 2015; Wagner et al. 2017). The institutional arrangements of the job centre demand that clients exhibit both agency, by showing and proving the abilities of a worker, and vulnerability, to be eligible to claim welfare benefits (Mik-Meyer and Haugaard 2021; Mitchell 2020; Mäkitalo 2006). At the same time, the institutional structures impose structural constraints upon clients that reduce their ability to exhibit agency, dispossess them of former roles and limit their creative repertoires of performative identity practices. This study shows how actors may respond to such dramaturgical identity dilemmas through displays that combine agentic and vulnerable stances amidst constraining institutional demands and arrangements. The performance of agentic vulnerability involved juggling an agentic, heroic self and a vulnerable expression of the victim position, in order to provide the 'right' corrective story (Goffman 1963). Agentic vulnerability was also accomplished through subtle resistive stances to the digital institutional arrangements, which displayed role distance from the unwanted identity of being unemployed. This symbolically removed the clients from the discrediting situation, but risked limiting their opportunities for case progression and social participation.

The performative resolution of identity dilemmas therefore involves both micro- and macro-level interaction dynamics. We have responded to recent calls from scholars to engage further with issues of structural constraint and inequality in the study of stigmatised identities (Chatzitheochari and Butler-Rees 2023; Müller 2020; Thomas 2021). There is also a need for more empirical studies that emphasise the interplay between individual agency, resistance and the institutional context of structural stigma (Alexandrescu and Spicer 2023; Link and Phelan 2001; Thomas 2021). The present study contributes to this debate, too. For example, through the technique of resister-talk, we demonstrated how actors' subtle resistive responses to institutional arrangements acknowledged the impingements of the welfare system.

Our research also contributes to the growing field of the sociology of nothing (Scott 2019) and related calls to pay attention to the domains of the latent, unmarked and taken-for-granted aspects of everyday life (Brekhus 1998, 2015; Zerubavel 2015). In the micro-level processes of interaction, negational forms of social action constitute significant means of accomplishing self-identity (Scott 2019, 2020). Some vulnerable people in marginalised positions negotiate their

identities through forms of negational talk, such as disavowing accounts, sad tales and apologias, and we have shown how these involve acts of commission and omission.

Finally, we emphasise the need to go beyond a binary conception of the benefits and risks, or 'pros and cons', of digitalisation (Nordsjö et al. 2022; Steiner 2021). Our study shows the double-edged effects of the institutional digital infrastructure and its ambivalent meanings for those who encounter it. The institutional tools, technologies and machinery of administrative systems may hold vulnerable clients suspended in perpetual loops of waiting, acting, management and disciplinary surveillance. However, clients can also use the intricate digital system to exhibit agentic vulnerability and perform subtle forms of resistance to constraining institutional conditions. In the personal stories of these vulnerable clients, we see how the organisational context of technology shapes the subjective lived experience of stigma, revealing the micro-social dynamics of power and resistance in everyday life.

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Article 3:

The role of phone mediation: Social workers' and vulnerable clients' role performances in mediated welfare encounters

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Abstract

Welfare encounters are increasingly conducted using communication devices comprising mediated encounters. This article contributes to studies on the integration of mediated encounters into social work practice. This study adopts a symbolic interactionist perspective and is based on interviews with 24 social workers and 17 vulnerable clients. It examines the role of phone mediation in the role performances of social workers and clients in mediated welfare encounters that lack non-verbal communication. This study argues that phone mediation visualises the unequal stakes in welfare encounters: A professional work role and organisational goal attainment are at stake for social workers, whereas vulnerable clients' livelihoods depend on welfare encounters and the social and economic support provided by such encounters. Such stakes are often taken for granted in routine face-to-face welfare encounters. Thus, phone mediation alerts the participants to the consequentiality of welfare encounters. Moreover, this article finds that phone mediation may provide confidential distance, which can be used to support hard-to-reach clients and social work practices. However, mediated encounters can risk being insignificant for client trajectories and restrict the roles of social workers and clients. Overall, the study highlights everyday technologies, such as phones, that are important for the social worker-client relationship, welfare delivery, and clients' welfare trajectories. It argues for further inclusion of everyday technologies in future research agendas that examine the digitalisation of social work and the importance of non-verbal communication.

Introduction

Social work practice includes various information and communication technologies (ICTs) that bring challenges, opportunities, and risks for social work (Gillingham, 2021; Høybye-Mortensen, 2015; Nordesjö et al., 2022; Ylvisaker and Rugkåsa, 2022). ICTs may change the ways of interacting with clients, social workers' coping strategies (Burton and van den Broek, 2009; Gillingham, 2021), and social worker–client relationships (Nordesjö et al., 2022). Although information systems have been well-researched, scholars have paid less attention to the digitalisation of communication between clients and social workers (Böhringer, 2015; Jeyasingham, 2020; Lindgren et al., 2019). One way of digitalising communication in welfare services is to use everyday technology, such as phones, to conduct welfare encounters.

Despite the pervasiveness of phones in everyday life, using such communication devices as a substitute for face-to-face encounters has seen slower progress in social work practices in welfare services (Fiorentino et al., 2023; Flügge and Møller, 2023). Face-to-face encounters are a core element of social work. They promote the social worker-client relationship and rely on non-verbal communication to assess the client (Böhringer, 2015; Fiorentino et al., 2023; Flügge and Møller, 2023). Hence, a growing body of research is investigating what happens when face-to-face encounters are extended to technological means (Fiorentino et al., 2023; Flügge and Møller, 2023; Kong et al., 2022; Løberg and Egeland, 2023; Pink et al., 2022). In this study, an encounter facilitated via a communicative device such as a phone comprises mediated interaction (Thompson, 2020: 5). Although various digital communication technologies are available to conduct welfare encounters, studies have found that traditional means of communication, such as phone calls, remain the clients' preferred medium for more difficult conversations with social workers (Ebbers et al., 2016; Tangi et al., 2021). Recent studies call for more research on how everyday work practices are organised using everyday communication devices such as mobile phones (Mullan and Wajcman, 2019) and how social work can manage missing non-verbal cues usually available in face-to-face interactions (Christensen et al., 2022; Fiorentino et al., 2023; Flügge and Møller, 2023; Kong et al., 2022). This study responds to such calls and engages with social workers' and vulnerable unemployed clients' role performances in welfare encounters mediated by mobile phones.

This study contributes to the literature on integrating mediated interactions into social work practices for welfare services. The study is empirically grounded in interviews with social workers and clients and examines their spontaneously arising reflections on mediated interactions that lack

non-verbal communication. It adopts an interactionist approach and uses concepts of frame (Goffman, 1986), role (Goffman, 1972), and retrospective fatefulness (Goffman, 1967) to analyse the role performances of social workers and clients. It addresses the overall research question: What role does phone mediation play in the role performances of social workers and vulnerable clients in mediated welfare encounters?

Mediated encounters in social work

Research discussions revolve around how mediated encounters create problems and opportunities in social work (Breit et al., 2021; Christensen et al., 2022; Løberg and Egeland, 2023). For example, mediated interactions may limit the sensory experiences of welfare encounters (Flügge and Møller, 2023; Kong et al., 2022; Pink et al., 2020, 2022), foster closer relationships with clients, blur boundaries between professional and home life, and empower or alienate clients (Berkowsky, 2013; Breit et al., 2021). Pink et al. (2022) argued that future social work will further integrate digital practices such as video calls and constitute a hybrid practice of using both face-to-face and mediated interactions.

In a study on online text-based platforms, Løberg and Egeland (2023) find that although mediated interactions can be emotionally straining, social workers can use digital communication with clients to establish trust and acquire necessary information. They argued that using digital communication can promote the use of emotions in social work to strengthen the social worker-client relationship, which can ensure the achievement of organisational goals (Løberg and Egeland, 2023). Studying a broad range of digital communication channels, Christensen et al. (2022) demonstrated that digital communication can create positive outcomes, such as building relationships with hard-to-reach clients. However, they also found that digital communication may spur the demand for services, as social workers appear more available for interaction and limit access to sensory and bodily cues such as eye contact (Christensen et al., 2022).

In a study of job centres, Flügge and Møller (2023) emphasised the importance of non-verbal cues in assessing clients and the need for finding alternatives for this practice that do not rely on non-verbal communication. Fiorentino et al. (2023) found that the absence of non-verbal communication such as visual expressions, gestures, moods, and faces can negatively affect the social worker-client relationship and lead to misunderstandings. Moreover, they showed that social workers may compensate for the lack of non-verbal cues by relying on language (Fiorentino

et al., 2023). They added that mediated interactions may upset unequal relationships between social workers and clients (Fiorentino et al., 2023: 11).

Examining marginalised people with various vulnerabilities appears to be under-researched (Johannessen, 2023) and should be encouraged in future studies (Madsen et al., 2022; Nordesjö et al., 2022). Furthermore, previous research mandates more micro-sociological empirical work on the bodily aspects of mediated interactions and encourages future studies to embed such examinations within the context of official services and their structural conditions (Benediktsson et al., 2015; Thompson, 2020; Walsh and Clark, 2019). This study contributes an interactionist perspective to the literature on mediated welfare encounters. It highlights everyday technology and the importance of the (absence of) non-verbal communication for the role performances of social workers and clients.

Analytical framework: An interactionist perspective on welfare encounters

Welfare encounters govern clients' economic and social security, and entail a power asymmetry that favours social workers (Mäkitalo, 2006; Mik-Meyer and Silverman, 2019). In these encounters, the client and social worker are structurally constrained within specific performances. From a Goffmanian perspective, such performances entail a consistent presentation of the self, 'face' (Goffman, 1967: 5f), and maintenance of a specific pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts, 'line' (Goffman, 1967: 5). The normative expectations of a given situation shape the performance of a specific role (Goffman, 1986: 345). A role break may occur when someone acts outside of the expected role (Goffman, 1972: 89).

From this perspective, the professional social worker role comprises a working identity, which, in the context of the welfare situation, does not deviate negatively from the norms of the given society. Goffman terms such individuals, 'the normals' (Goffman, 1990: 15). The client role entails the stigma of unemployment, through which they depart from the norms of a given society (Goffman, 1990: 13f), and which professionals are tasked with managing within the job centre. The encounter between a stigmatised individual and a 'normal' (Goffman, 1990: 15) implies uncertainty for the one bearing a stigma as they rely on the other's categorisation and judgement (Goffman, 1990: 24f). Thus, the welfare encounter may be construed as a situation in which clients are confronted with their unemployment as a stigma, which motivates negotiations of identity, explanations, and excuses for such deviation (Gubrium and Järvinen, 2014). In such situations,

the client's role entails demonstrating agency and vulnerability to prove their eligibility for continued economic and social support (Caswell et al., 2013; Mik-Meyer and Haugaard, 2021; Mitchell, 2020). The social worker's role as an institutional representative implies achieving organisational goals, abiding by rules and regulations, and caring for people in marginalised positions (Mäkitalo, 2006; Mik-Meyer and Silverman, 2019; Parton, 2008).

All role performances follow lines of activities that sustain attention and refer side involvements to outside the established frame of the encounter: a frame structures experiences and holds certain expectations for performances and interactions (Goffman, 1986: 210,345). Activities and interactions that cannot be returned to order or understood within a given frame motivate frame breaks (Goffman, 1986: 348ff). Frame breaks can constitute problematic or consequential situations for social actors, comprising fateful actions (Goffman, 1967: 170). Social actors may only redefine a situation as a fateful endeavour after a consequential and problematic event occurs – Goffman terms such circumstance as 'retrospective fatefulness' (Goffman, 1967: 171). This study presents how social workers and clients sustain the frame of welfare encounters and their situational roles. Further, it demonstrates instances of retrospective fatefulness when the interviewees narrated mediated welfare encounters that were problematic or consequential to their role performances.

Methodology

Research setting

In Denmark, welfare services have been subjected to extensive digitalisation (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020). This includes the country's 94 job centres tasked with aiding unemployed citizens in jobs, training, or education. In job centres, clients are expected to be able to navigate digital self-help solutions, access digital mail, and engage in job centre-related activities online. Clients and social workers must meet face-to-face (Department for Employment, 2022). However, this stipulation was relaxed during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this period, social workers engaged in welfare encounters with clients over the phone. Since then, legislation has included the possibility of continuing mediated welfare encounters; this practice has continued after the pandemic. For vulnerable clients, legislation proposes mediated encounters as a possibility rather than a legal requirement (Danish Agency for Labour Market and Recruitment, 2022).

Although different digital communication modes, such as video calls, were available, the interviewed social workers expressed that most of their clients were uncomfortable with the video conversations, which was supported by the interviewed clients. Instead, phone calls were the preferred medium for conducting welfare encounters for both groups without using a video function.

Data collection

This study draws on qualitative open-ended interviews (Charmaz, 2014) conducted in Danish job centres in 2021. The interviewees comprised 24 social workers working with vulnerable clients and 17 vulnerable clients aged 28–66 years who experienced mental, social, and physical challenges in addition to unemployment.

Interviews with social workers probed their use of and experience with digital technology. Considering the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted via phone or video calls according to the social workers' preferences. The interviews lasted between 45 and 102 minutes with an average of 78 minutes.

The interviews with clients focused on their daily lives, unemployment trajectories, and experiences with digital technology in contact with job centres. The interviews were conducted via phone (12) during the COVID-19 lockdown and face-to-face (5) after the partial restoration of social contact. The interviews lasted between 29 and 104 minutes with an average of 65 minutes.

Informed consent was obtained and recorded for all interviews. The interviewees were assigned pseudonyms, and all recognisable details were removed from the quotes selected for analysis. The interviewees were assured that they could contact me for any questions regarding the study or their participation. All interviews were transcribed into the original language (Danish), and the selected quotes were translated into English.

The interviews were stored in secure folders in compliance with General Data Protection Regulations. This study was approved by the Ethics Council of the author's home institution and followed the Danish Code of Conduct for Researcher Integrity (Ministry of Higher Education and Science, 2014) and the BSA Statement of Ethical Practice (BSA, 2017).

Data analysis

The principles of constructing grounded theory informed this study's data collection and analytical approaches (Charmaz, 2014). During data collection, social workers and clients commented on missing body language in welfare encounters via phone calls. The topic of non-verbal communication developed unprompted while speaking about the use of digitalisation in welfare encounters through questions such as 'How are digital technologies used in your encounters with a client?' or 'How does the COVID-19 pandemic affect your contact with the job centre?' The issue of non-verbal communication became a recurring topic, arising spontaneously from the interviewees' reflections on the above questions. Social workers expressed difficulties in adjusting their performance in welfare encounters via phone, which they could easily accomplish in face-to-face encounters. The clients asserted that they missed eye contact experienced during face-to-face encounters. Thus, the data revealed that although interaction via phone is an unremarkable everyday occurrence, it acquired importance in welfare encounters because there is much at stake in such situations, such as clients' assurance of continued social and economic support.

All experiences of digital and phone interactions were openly coded, including mentions of visual cues and their absence, facial expressions, body language, and comparisons between face-to-face and phone encounters. These excerpts were then openly coded, limiting each code to two to three lines. This process was repeated, and the coding was updated as the interviews were added. The excerpts were reread and re-coded several times to refine the codes. Finally, the codes were grouped into three categories: 'using mediated distance', 'negotiating what is effective', and 'missing out on non-verbal communication'. In the following analysis, the first two categories are examined jointly to provide an understanding of the role of phone mediation in mediated welfare encounters. The third category constitutes the second part of the analysis which specifically addresses the role of phone mediation for social workers' and clients' role performances. I use social worker and client accounts jointly to elucidate the two analytical sections. Following Pratt (2008: 501), proof quotes were selected to demonstrate the prevalence of an argument and power quotes to illustrate a point concisely. The forthcoming analysis takes departure and foregrounds the interviewees' spontaneous narratives about mediated interactions and what it means to lack non-verbal communication in a welfare encounter.

Findings

A 'confidential' distance and an informative flexibility

Social workers and clients reported that mediated encounters could provide confidentiality and flexibility, and, in some cases, support social work and client participation. However, although social workers benefited from the flexibility of mediated encounters through short and effective conversations, clients defined short encounters as unsatisfactory and praised conversations that valued their social narratives.

Social workers asserted that mediated welfare encounters are 'more effective' (Liv) and 'we talk about what we need to and one does not have to add more to it as we would if we sit across from each other' (Liv). Social workers could 'get more done more when the encounters are via phone' (John) because 'it only takes ten or fifteen minutes on the phone' (Thea). Phone conversations were described in terms of their effectiveness in obtaining information suitable for documentation purposes, which provided time for other work tasks on social workers' busy workdays. However, reflecting on this effectiveness, a social worker, Tabita experienced herself as a 'real caseworker'. She missed having time to ask, 'How is your son and things like that which the client may have mentioned face-to-face' (Tabita). Previous studies have addressed the focus of phone conversations on facts and information as valuing the informational descriptions of clients' social narratives (Gillingham, 2015; Parton, 2008). This implies that although phone mediation can provide flexibility in social workers' workdays, it may also impede the development of the social worker-client relationship and restrict the social worker's role in processing the client as a case, which may neglect the clients' social narratives. This may show unfavourable consequences for welfare delivery. To address the beneficial aspects of phone mediation, social workers foreground work with hard-to-reach clients and a confidential distance. They described this confidential distance as follows:

> It can be disarming to speak on the phone. I experience that suddenly my conversations are much longer because they [the clients] are not in such a rush to leave [the job centre]. (Rie, social worker)

> Yesterday, I had a client who said, 'I believe it is easier to tell you some things when we are not face-to-face'. Moreover, I believe that sometimes I am better in virtual meetings where I cannot see my client. (Clara, social worker)

He talked for longer than usual [on the phone] and could endure participating in the meeting for longer than usual. Moreover, I could follow him and sense his mood. The exchange of information was excellent. I received all the required information. (Naja, social worker)

According to social workers, certain clients may benefit from the anonymity provided by missing visual cues, which can make it easier for them to participate in welfare encounters, whereas social workers manage to obtain the required information. Social worker Clara continued that on the phone, the clients 'do not have to see my reaction', which can be beneficial for them and particularly useful with hard-to-reach clients 'who do not want anything to do with the job centre'. Furthermore, social workers have to adjust to not 'sitting in front of them, having this connection and seeing them, seeing their face, their mimics, and their body language' (Naja). On the phone, one must 'use one's voice much more intently' (Sam). This supports findings from previous studies asserting that social workers may find new ways of assessing and working with clients without visual cues (Fiorentino et al., 2023; Flügge and Møller, 2023). Thus, phone mediation may become a disarming tool, providing a confidential distance in working with certain clients.

Across client interviews, the duration of conversations tended to be a standard measure against which mediated welfare encounters were assessed. Some mediated encounters could be 'just as long and everything' (Arnold) compared with face-to-face encounters and provide space to 'get some things off my chest' (Sarah). Other clients reported that phone conversations were short and perceived them as a 'waste of time' (Per) or 'some babbling' (Edith), causing frustration. A client, Per, described mediated encounters in terms of insignificance and as a chore: 'I do not really know what I should use them for. They are fine. It must be done.' Such insignificance may indicate that the progress of clients' welfare trajectories is impeded. Across the interviews, clients described helpful conversations in terms of a 'professional and personal relationship' (Berta) with their social worker. For example, Berta typified her social worker as follows:

He is not a questionnaire-social worker – I do not know if that is the right word. He is a human social worker. Do you understand what I mean? (I: No, can you please elaborate on this?) Well, I do not know if he does [look at a questionnaire], but on its face, I do not believe he is sitting with the schema he fills out. It feels similar to a fluent conversation with someone you are familiar with. (Berta, client)

In Berta's explanation, filling out 'questionnaires' while conversing with her constitutes 'side

involvements' (Goffman 1986: 345) that distract attention from what she expects of the welfare encounter and the social worker's role performance. For clients, it is key that the line, face, and main activity of the frame be sustained in phone conversations that provide personal and professional encounters, despite missing visual interaction cues.

In summary, welfare encounters may benefit from the distance phone mediation provides. However, if the flexibility of mediated encounters is used for the effectiveness of short but informative conversations, then the welfare encounter risks becoming insignificant for clients and can be experienced as restricting the social worker's role. This can have unfavourable consequences for the social worker-client relationship, welfare delivery, and clients' welfare trajectories.

'There is always this risk': Role performances in the absence of non-verbal cues

Social workers and clients have reported that mediated encounters can be risky, transgressive, or uncomfortable. They attributed this to the lack of non-verbal cues perceived through faces, bodily gestures, and by sensing moods.

Social workers described that they usually directed their reactions and speech by assessing their clients' 'state, hygiene, how they are, how they sit' (Sam) and when 'their eyes get darker' (Cole). When such cues are limited, it is difficult for clients to 'obtain a sense of who we are and place trust in us' (Vera), which may impede the development of the social worker-client relationship. In such explanations, the body becomes 'consequential equipment' (Goffman, 1967: 167) because it is absent from the encounter. Social worker Nina explained:

> […] suddenly, some boundaries are changed and traditionally, well, because it is a relation of power, and I have always been occupied by that, being clear about what the boundaries are. This [welfare encounter] is not a social gathering. It is to take them [clients] for a ride and pretend that I am not an authority. No one will be happy about this. At the same time, I should not be a threatening authority. There should be a collaboration, and I should be able to set the scene and tell them: 'These are the boundaries within which we will work'. I listen to them and ask which path they want to take and tell them that I can meet you thus and thus far. I have always been able to do this face-to-face. However, it all goes west now, because my first meeting is a phone call or text, anger, and confusion.

No one knows where the scene is, and well, it becomes boundaryless! (Nina, social worker)

In the above-quoted extract, Nina retrospectively recited a 'frame breaking' (Goffman, 1986: 348) instance as her normative expectations for the meeting were not met, and she was unable to perform her 'traditional' social worker role of 'authority' and uphold her desired 'face' and 'line' (Goffman, 1967: 5f) within the 'relation of power' (Nina). Welfare encounters constitute power relations, as the client and the social worker are both governed and constrained by the norms and principles of a given situation, which produce certain conditions for role performance (Mik-Meyer, 2017: 6f). Previous studies have suggested that mediated encounters may provide more equal relationships or empower clients (Breit et al., 2021; Fiorentino et al., 2023). This study reveals that the organisation of the welfare frame can be renegotiated in mediated encounters, which challenges the structure, roles, and relations of power within the welfare encounter. Social worker Cole maintained that phone conversations may pose a risk.

There is always a risk that we misinterpret one another because I can easily let something slip or if I need some water and my voice is a bit rusty and I say something and it sounds crude to the client; and when they cannot read my face and see that I am smiling at the other end. Hence, they may misinterpret: 'Well, Cole does not care about me'. Therefore, this risk is always present. I am worried that yesterday when I told the client, 'Now this is an important call, I have to take it', he may have felt turned down. If I could simply sit in front of the client. It is only normal communication with arms, legs, and the body, therefore, it is easier for them to non-verbally observe what is going on compared with when we talk on the phone. So, much information is lost. (Cole, social worker)

For social workers, mediated interactions may spur an experience of losing control over the situation in which they risk a role break (Goffman, 1972: 89) by the 'risk that we misinterpret one another' due to missing 'arms, legs and the body' to direct their professional role performances to fit the welfare frame. The above-quoted instance is recounted through 'retrospective fatefulness' (Goffman, 1967: 171), acknowledging the potentially problematic and consequential role of phone mediation for the social worker's performance as the institutional representative and the organisation of the relations of power within the welfare encounter, which may impact the attainment of organisationally required goals. The frame of the welfare encounter was also challenged by clients' role breaks in social workers' perceptions. Social worker Anja's client attempted to bring the phone to the restroom while being in a welfare conversation with her, which

Anja explained through the client not being able to 'see the professional line, which they can see when we are face-to-face' (Anja). This instance represents a role break (Goffman, 1972: 89) in the client's performance, motivated by missing non-verbal cues that distinguish 'the professional line', implying the rules and structure of the given welfare frame. Another social worker expressed how her clients invited other participants into the conversation on the phone and spoke to her 'as if they were posting on my [Facebook] page' (Nina). John, a third social worker, recounted the experience of fitting his welfare call into his client's daily life, who could not answer the phone because it did not fit her breakfast routine. Although social workers may perceive such situations as instances of clients' role breaks, these instances also allow the inference that clients may be given the opportunity to renegotiate the power relations of welfare encounters, assuming control over the space, time, and language of the encounter.

Clients asserted the importance of the visual input of social workers' mimics and reciprocal body language, noticing the importance of eye contact. A client Will stated, 'Face-to-face, she can see my facial expressions, if anything is up or something I cannot express. If I struggled with anything, we would walk away for five minutes and talk, and then we would return; and that is what I miss [on the phone]. Will's utterance may be construed as a collaborative effort with a social worker to maintain his 'face' and 'line' (Goffman, 1967: 7) to uphold his self-presentation in the situation. Another participant, Cindy, described the problematic characteristics of phone conversations.

> I have no idea what she looks like. I have only spoken to her on the phone and I do not like it. […] It is strange speaking with a person who has such a significant impact on what happens to you and whom you do not know what looks like. You cannot read her facial mimics and something like that. It is weird. I actually look forward to, well, I do not like attending [face-to-face] meetings, and I do not like phone conversations, but I prefer being able to see people when it is something important. (Cindy, client)

Cindy's remark on the dependent position of a client and the social workers' power over 'what happens to you' reveals that missing non-verbal cues adds uncertainty to their already uncertain and dependent situations. According to Goffman, non-verbal communication is key for people to 'know with whom they are dealing' (Goffman 1961:77), which accords importance to knowing 'what she looks like'. Previous studies have stated that the clients experience having to display their vulnerabilities to achieve eligibility for welfare benefits (Mitchell, 2020), which traditionally includes an assessment of bodily appearance by the social worker (Flügge and Møller, 2023; Pink et al., 2022). The results of this study support these findings. The inability to display and explain

one's vulnerability can be 'consequential' (Goffman, 1967), as the clients depend on welfare encounters for continued social and economic support (Mäkitalo, 2006; Mik-Meyer and Silverman, 2019). Social workers also noted the importance of body cues in clients' self-presentations. For example, social worker John said, 'He is very frustrated that I have not seen him yet, so I could see with my own eyes that he is a poor walker'. The absence of visual cues heightens clients' awareness of uncertain situations that are retrospectively expressed as potentially consequential and problematic (Goffman, 1967: 171) for their lives. Edith described her frustration with phone-mediated encounters:

> I feel they are abusing that this is how things are [the COVID-19 pandemic]. Do you know how long it takes… It is some *babbling*. It only takes five minutes. I *feel* that when we come in and sit in front of them, they have a better chance of helping you. Right now it is only 'Well, okay, hello, there isn't anything really. We can see that you have noted this and that. How are you otherwise?' I am well prepared, so I know what to tell them about what I have been up to the last month and what is happening in my life. Right? But I feel everything is just *babbling.* (Edith, client)

For Edith, welfare encounters of 'five minutes' are frustrating because she cannot present her 'line' and 'face' as a well-prepared client and receive the help she requires. Her self-presentation is restricted by being unable to explain 'what I have been up to' and 'what is happening in my life'. Another client, Samira, stated that 'phone is just talking, a fantasy' (Samira, client). However, this state of 'fantasy' does not satisfy the clients' expected conditions of the welfare 'frame' (Goffman, 1986). Mediated welfare encounters can then hold the risk of inhibiting the performative repertoire of clients because of the limited sensory cues of interaction. This risk may cause increased uncertainty in vulnerable clients' already challenged lives, who depend on welfare encounters for social and economic support.

Discussion

This study explored the role of phone mediation in social workers' and clients' negotiations of their situational role performance in mediated welfare encounters without non-verbal cues. Using the concept of 'retrospective fatefulness' (Goffman, 1967: 171), the analysis based on interviews demonstrates that the stakes are different for social workers and clients in welfare encounters, which become visible when the encounters are mediated by phone, and the sensory cues of

interaction are limited. Clients and social workers are not equally matched in the welfare frame: while social workers' role performance relies on stepping into a professional work identity, the clients' role entails a stigma; their livelihood and sense of certainty depend on their self-presentation as clients. The traditional face-to-face welfare encounter comprises a routinised interaction between the professional and the client, holding specific expectations of the frame, activities, and situated roles performed within it. Owing to their routinised character, welfare encounters are rendered uneventful and (almost) predictable. This study argues that extending the welfare encounter to technological means, such as a phone, which limits the sensory cues of interaction, alerts participants to the stakes and uncertainty of the welfare encounter. Phone mediation visualises that social workers' occupational identity and attainment of the organisation's goals are at stake. However, it also visualises that the stakes are higher for clients, as their livelihood and sense of security in their daily lives depend on the professional's assessment. These stakes are taken for granted during routinised face-to-face welfare encounters. The (unprompted) importance that social workers and clients ascribe to symbolic cues of welfare encounters reveals the problematic and consequential dilemmas for welfare delivery, service, and clients' welfare trajectories that phone mediation may motivate. Thus, this study contributes to the discussion on the risky conditions of otherwise routinised encounters. Previous studies have revealed that social workers may be emotionally strained, experience blurred boundaries, increased demand for services, and be challenged by the loss of sensory cues in mediated interactions (Berkowsky, 2013; Christensen et al., 2022; Flügge and Møller, 2023; Løberg and Egeland, 2023). This study's utilisation of 'retrospective fatefulness' (Goffman, 1967) indicates that such challenges address the consequentiality embedded in welfare encounters and visualise what is at stake for participants and their situational role performance.

The findings of this study resonate with previous research showing that digital communication can benefit social work with clients who are considered hard-to-reach and can be used to promote the social worker-client relationship (Breit et al., 2021; Christensen et al., 2022; Løberg and Egeland, 2023). Using the interactionist framework, this study demonstrates that phone mediation can be used for its disarming qualities, providing confidential distance, and enabling some clients' participation in welfare encounters. According to the social workers' perceptions, this pattern prevailed for hard-to-reach clients who, in mediated interactions, did not have to manage their own or their social worker's non-verbal cues. Moreover, these findings support findings from previous studies (Fiorentino et al., 2023; Flügge and Møller, 2023) that social workers may learn

to conduct welfare encounters and direct their roles without using symbolic cues other than their voices. This study suggests that although sensory cues of interaction comprise key parts of a welfare encounter, in some cases, no visual cues can be preferable by being productive in terms of confidential distance and visual anonymity.

The extant literature suggests that mediated interactions may upset unequal social worker-client relationships and empower clients (Breit et al., 2021; Fiorentino et al., 2023). The results of the present study support these findings. Using interactionist concepts, this study indicates that, in mediated welfare encounters, clients may obtain opportunities to negotiate their own rules for welfare interaction by which the social worker's authority and situational control are challenged. This suggests that mediated encounters may comprise agentic ways for clients to structure the rules of encounters that upset power relations embedded in welfare encounters. However, such agentic possibilities for clients are analytically derived through interviews with social workers, and clients tend to accentuate the consequential and problematic aspects of phone mediation in their participation in welfare encounters. While agentic possibilities may be available, this study's findings primarily indicate that removing non-verbal communication can restrict clients' opportunities for self-presentation. Such restrictions may exacerbate existing inequalities and the asymmetric power relations between social workers and clients.

This study highlights the importance of considering the structural conditions (cf. Thompson 2020) within which mediated interactions unfold. Further, it demonstrates the inextricability of the risks and opportunities (cf. Nordesjö et al., 2022; Steiner 2021) of integrating communicative technology into social work practices. The findings of this study are periodically derived from the COVID-19 pandemic, which can be a limitation in that the practice of integrating mediated welfare encounters may have been further established in practice. However, focusing on the phone foregrounds the mundane, which tends to be overlooked amid newer digital developments in research and practice. Thus, this study contributes to the literature by focusing on mundane mediated welfare encounters which may otherwise remain unchallenged because of their routinised everyday characteristics. Future research could further embed the interactionist framework to study mundane mediated interactions in welfare organisational contexts. Future studies could also examine the development of client strategies to perform clienthood in the absence of non-verbal interaction cues.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the literature by focusing on the role performances of clients and social workers in mediated welfare encounters and the role of phone mediation. Using the phone as an example, this study demonstrates the importance of taken-for-granted non-verbal communication and suggests what is at stake in welfare encounters. As the digital agenda advances, social work practices may further consider that removing non-verbal communication presents substantive challenges for the social worker-client relationship, welfare delivery, clients' lives, and their sense of security. Furthermore, future research on digital social work as a hybrid practice (cf. Pink et al. 2022) should further consider everyday technologies such as mobile phones.

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Appendix (Part One)

Appendix A: Interviewguide – Social workers

Introduction

I would like to start by introducing myself briefly. I hold a degree in sociology and began my PhD at CBS in September 2020. My project is about digitalisation in the public sector, with a focus on job centres. I am particularly interested in understanding what digitalisation means for vulnerable clients and your work with them. Therefore, I will, during the interview, ask you about your work and the digital systems you use, along with what they mean for your work and interactions with your clients. You are very welcome to give examples during our conversation to help me understand the role of digitalisation in your work better.

It is important to ensure you that your participation in this project is entirely voluntary, and you have full control. If there is anything you are uncomfortable with discussing, please do not hesitate to let me know, and we will move on. I will treat the information you share with me confidentially, and your name and personal identifiers will never be revealed in the work resulting from this interview. If I use a quote it will be anonymised. This interview will be recorded and transcribed, and all data will be securely stored in an approved folder accessible only to me, my supervisor at CBS and a student assistant. The data will be retained in its original form until the project's conclusion. I want to assure you that the things we discuss will not be shared unanonymised with anyone outside my project team.

Does this sound acceptable to you? Do you have any questions before we get started?

Note: motivate for stories of concrete meetings with clients. Main questions should be posed, questions in list form are supportive as a follow-up, i.e. do not have to be posed if already explained in their talk.

Introduction

Could you start by telling me about yourself? (Age, education, experience, position at the job center, etc.)

How long have you been working here?

Can you describe what a typical workday looks like for you? (Maybe both before and during the Covid-19 pandemic?)

Clients

Now, let us move on to discuss your interactions with clients. Please feel free to use specific examples and scenarios from your work, perhaps something you have thought about before our conversation.

Can you describe your group of clients?

- What challenges (besides unemployment) do your clients face?
- What kinds of digital challenges do clients encounter, and how do they or you address them?

If you think back to a challenging or difficult interaction with a client, could you describe the scenario?

- What challenges did the client have? And regarding employment?
- What digital challenges did the client experience?

If you think back to a successful interaction with a client, could you describe the scenario?

- What were the challenges here, including any digital challenges?

How are digital technologies used in your encounters with a client?

- Which digital initiatives have been beneficial in your work with clients? Which have been challenging?
- How do you prepare for your meetings with clients?
- Do you take notes during these meetings, digitally or by hand? Why?

What expectations do you have for your clients when you first meet them? And what about later on in the progress of the case? Can you give an example?

- Any differences in the expectations you have for your clients? Please explain.
- What expectations do your clients have of you and the process at the job centre?
- Do you have expectations regarding clients' digital abilities? Why? How?

How has Covid-19 affected your clients?

- Are they more proficient with digital tools now, or has it posed particular challenges for them? How?

Is there anything in the current legislation that poses specific challenges for your clients and your work with them? Why? How?

Digital Systems and Tools

Now, let us move to talking about the digital tools and systems you use in your daily work.

Can you describe the systems and tools you use during your workday and how?

- If you are a superuser: What does being a 'superuser' mean to you, and why did you become one?
- If you recall the most recent digital system/tool introduced in your work, how did the implementation process go? Are you still using it?

Are there any systems and tools you cannot work without? Why? How?

- Conversely, are there any that are redundant or unnecessary?
- Which systems and tools do you think are useful for your work? Can you give an example of when you use them?
- Which systems or tools hinder your work, if any (e.g., due to errors, deficiencies, operational issues)? Can you give an example?
- How much of your workday is spent using digital systems and tools?

How has Covid-19 changed your use of digital tools in your workday?

- What challenges have arisen?
- Have there been any positive developments?

- Have there been any legislative challenges?

How do your colleagues use digital systems and tools?

- Are there any differences in the way you and your colleagues use the systems you described? Which? How?
- Do any of your colleagues struggle with digital tools? How do they manage these challenges?

If you use risk assessment tools such as Asta and/or STAR:

Can you tell me how you use risk assessment tools in your work?

- What do they help you with?
- Do they provide capabilities you didn't have before?
- Do clients interact with these tools? How?
- Do the tools sometimes make error, or are there instances where they identify issues you had not noticed before?
- Do you think you could do without them in your workday?

Can you give an example of when you used such digital tools with a client?

Is there anything you are not satisfied with regarding these tools? Is there something you particularly like about them?

If not:

Why don't you use risk and profile assessment tools?

- Is this a decision made at the leadership level?
- What are your thoughts on these tools? Could you envision using them? Why or why not?
- What do you think could be the advantages of using them? What challenges or disadvantages do you anticipate?

Do you use other systems or tools I have not mentioned or that we have not discussed but are part of your daily routine? (e.g., speech recognition, etc.)

Concluding questions

What do you generally think about digitalisation and technological development?

Is there something you are worried about regarding current developments?

We have now reached the end of the interview. Is there anything you think I have not asked about during our talk?

Do you think your clients might be interested in speaking with me?

May I contact you again if I have any further questions or would like to conduct a follow-up interview with you?

Appendix B: Interviewguide – Clients

Introduction

I would like to start by introducing myself briefly. I hold a degree in sociology and began my PhD at CBS in September 2020. My project is about digitalisation in the public sector, with a focus on job centres. Therefore, I will be asking you about your daily life, the digital systems you use in your interactions with the municipality and especially the job centre. You are very welcome to give examples during our conversation to help me understand your experiences with digital systems and tools better.

Your participation in this interview is entirely voluntary, and you are in full control. If there is anything you do not want to answer, please do not hesitate to let me know, and we will move on. I will treat the information you share with me confidentially, and your name and other personal details will not be disclosed in any materials resulting from these interviews. If I use a quote from you in my work it will be anonymised. This interview will be recorded, and I will securely store it in an approved folder, accessible only to me, my supervisor at CBS and a student assistant. Data will be retained in its original form until the project's conclusion. It is important for me to reassure you that the things we talk about will not be shared with anyone outside the project team in un-anonymised form.

Does this sound acceptable to you? Do you have any questions before we proceed?

Note: Follow the narrative. Main questions should be posed, questions in list form are supportive as a follow-up, i.e. do not have to be posed if already explained in their talk.

Introduction

Could you tell me a bit about yourself? (Age, previous work/experience, family, education, etc.)

- What is your educational background? Did you use digital tools or assistance during your education?
- How about your work? What have you worked on?

Can you describe what a typical day looks like for you? (Before and during the pandemic)

How long have you been in contact with the job centre?

- On multiple occasions?
- What was your most recent job?

Encounters with the Job Centre

Now, let us talk about your meetings at the job centre. Please feel free to give examples.

If you think back to when you became unemployed (this time), could you describe what you had to do?

- How did you need to register with the job centre?
- What was your first meeting with your case worker like?
- Any requirements or expectations towards you?
- Do you have expectations for the job centre?
- How often do you have meetings at the job centre? Do you sometimes request meetings yourself?
- How do you book meetings? How does your case worker keep in contact with you?

- Who else is involved in your case? A mentor, a job consultant, others in the municipality? How do you stay in touch with them?

What do you think you can use the job centre for?

- What do you gain from these meetings?
- If you have been unemployed multiple times, has your use of the job centre changed?
- How much control do you have over what your process and meetings at the job centre involve?
- Do you have a plan for your time at the job centre? What does it include? What are your thoughts on it?

If you think back to the last time you found it challenging to use something digital at the job centre, could you tell me about it?

- How did it happen?
- Why was it difficult?
- How did you get help?

What can you use Jobnet for?

- How does the job log function for you? Have you ever had any challenges with it?
- Self-booking? CV? Keeping your CV up-to-date and searchable – how does that work for you?
- Is there anything else you can see/do on Jobnet?
- Is there anything you feel is missing on Jobnet? Any information about your case?
- Do you receive responses to your job applications on Jobnet?

How do digital technologies take part in your meetings with your social worker?

- Does your social worker use anything digital during your meetings?
- How about you?

What does " to work" mean for you? Why?

How does the COVID-19 pandemic affect your contact with the job centre?

- How are meetings conducted during the pandemic?

If applicable:

If you think back to your worst meeting with the job centre, how was it? Can you describe it?

If you think back to your best meeting with the job centre, how was it? Why was it good? Can you describe it.

Everyday life digital use

Now, I think we can move on to discussing other digital aspects in your everyday life, beyond your meetings at the job centre.

How do you use digital technologies in your everyday life?

- How did you learn to navigate the digital?
- How much do you use your computer?
- What do you use your phone for?
- If you are not interested in the digital world, why are you not interested?

What other digital sites and tools do you need to manage in your everyday life? For example, renewing prescriptions, NemID, E-Boks, etc.

- What can be challenging in this regard?
- Do you use E-Boks and NemID?

If you need help with something digital, who can you ask?

- Can it be difficult to ask for help?
- Is there a difference in who you ask for help depending on what you need assistance with?

How has Covid-19 affected your everyday life?

- Do you use digital tools differently now?

Socialt network and social media

How do you keep in touch with your friends and family?

How do you use social media?

- What platforms do you use? Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc.? What do you use these different platforms for?
- Why did you start using social media?
- If you are not on social media, why do you not use it?

How has Covid-19 affected your friends/family?

- Do you see any of them in your daily life? Do you call each other more often?

Concluding questions

What do you think about digitalisation nowadays?

What are your thoughts on municipalities having so much information on their citizens?

Is there anything that concerns you about the current digital development?

Is there anything you think I have not asked you during our talk?

If I have forgotten to ask you something or would like to speak with you again, may I contact you?

Appendix C: Letter of invitation, social workers

PhD Project on Digitalisation in Work with Vulnerable Citizens

In my PhD project, I focus on the impact and consequences of digitalisation for vulnerable and marginalised citizens in their interactions with the public sector. The research project specifically focuses on job centres and explores how digital solutions and tools change or impact the work with vulnerable citizens.

You are invited to participate in **an interview about your work.** The interview is expected to take approximately one hour, depending on how much you would like to share. I am interested in learning about your experiences with using digital systems and tools in your work, particularly in your interactions with citizens. When referring to digital systems and tools, I mean all kinds of systems ranging from internal systems, such as Schultz Facit or KMD Momentum, to the systems used by citizens, such as Jobnet, self-booking, and self-service forms. Feel free to reflect on a few citizen cases from your professional experience, for example challenging or successful, and share your thoughts or concrete examples from your work during the interview.

Given the current circumstances, interviews will be conducted online, and I am flexible regarding whether you prefer to do the **interview via phone or Teams/Zoom.** Please feel free to contact me via email or phone to schedule a time for the interview. I would greatly appreciate it if you had time to speak with me!

The study will involve approximately **2-3 municipalities**, with around 10 interviews conducted with caseworkers and job consultants from each municipality. Additionally, there will be 10-15 interviews with citizens, as well as interviews with other stakeholders at a later stage in the study.

Participation in the study is voluntary, and all information you share with me is treated in accordance with GDPR legislation. Your name and other personal identifiers will never be disclosed in the materials I produce based on the interviews I conduct. The interviews will be recorded and transcribed, and I will securely store everything in an approved folder accessible to me and my supervisor, Nanna Mik-Meyer. Data will be retained until the completion of the project and subsequently only in non-personally identifiable form. If you have any questions, you can contact our data protection officer at dpo@cbs.dk. You also have the option to file a complaint with the Danish Data Protection Agency.

I look forward to hearing from you!

Appendix D: Letter of invitation, clients

PhD Project on Digitalisation

My research focuses on the digital aspects of your meetings with the job centre. I would like to investigate what works well and what can be challenging about digital technologies and tools. I would also like to hear about any other experiences you might have with digital tools.

I invite you to participate in an **interview about your experiences with digital technologies, systems and tools**, such as Jobnet, NemID, or digital mail. The interview is expected to take about 45 minutes, depending on how much you wish to share, and it will be conducted over the phone or online if you prefer it.

We will talk about:

- You and your daily life
- Your experiences with digital tools in your current and past interactions with the job centre
- Positive and challenging experiences with digital tools in general, such as NemID, e-boks, etc.

Participation is voluntary, and I treat the information you share with me **confidentially** in accordance with GDPR legislation. Your name and other personal identifiers will never be disclosed in my work. The interviews will be recorded, and I will securely store everything in an approved folder, accessible to me and my colleague, Nanna Mik-Meyer. Data will be retained until the project's completion and subsequently only in non-personally identifiable form. If you have any questions, you can contact our data protection officer at dpo@cbs.dk. You also have the option to file a complaint with the Danish Data Protection Agency.

I look forward to speaking with you!

Appendix E: Coding example – article 1

Building chronology

Describing notations and selections

Recording all occupational information

Noting 'holes' in the CV

Experiencing the CV as shameful and condescending for the clients

Adapting and avoiding

Forgetting procedures

Fitting the CV to the client

Not doing what is required

Resisting fitting people to Excel sheets

Using the Digital CV tool

Explaining digital skills with age differences

Describing types of clients' sickness identities

Expecting clients' digital learning capabilities

Distinguishing different types of clients

Using time in explaining digital work, including the CV

Interacting with the CV

Revealing hidden skills

'Mental reworking'

Using the CV as an active tool

Building onto the CV experiences – clients as 'work in progress'

This example depicts the categorisation of codes for article one. As described in Chapter 5, the coding process of the category 'using the CV' revealed 12 new codes (the square shapes). These were grouped into categories. Three of these categories were chosen for analysis and are visualised by slightly grey squares, which include the selected codes (the square shapes) and their subcodes (dotted round shapes).

Appendix F: Coding example – article 2

Interview excerpt: Client, 30s	**Initial coding through line-by-line, word-by-word**
Interviewer: Could you start by telling me a bit about yourself?	
Client: Well, yeah, you know/ Yeah, well… I have met. Well, if we are to speak about the municipality, then I have encountered the system twice, that is the job centre. I am in my thirties and when I was pregnant with my daughter it showed that I had cancer while I was pregnant.	Using the words 'encountering the system' to describe unemployment Defining a problem – sickness narrative through cancer while pregnant
Interviewer: Oh.	
Client: Previously I always worked 45+ hours. I was unemployed for a short period of time back during the financial crises, I was young and unemployed. I have always been the type that had to earn money to be able to take an education and stuff like that. Yeah. And then I end up being pregnant with my daughter 8 years ago and I feel really bad and nobody knows why. It is just a big chaos. I give birth to my daughter and get surgery and then I am on sick leave and get another surgery next year. And get another surgery due to cancer. The first time I am in contact with the job centre, I am on sickness benefits. And they speak of rehabilitation and flexjob, but I was young and I did not want to do that at that time. And I was going crazy at home so I got the permission to begin an education. I chose to receive the state education funds and I had the feeling that I could make it even though I was not completely healthy yet but I felt/ Yeah at that time we spoke about the rehabilitation program instead, but I thought: I can do it by myself. I did not want to take up the spot from someone else who might have needed it more.	-Defining herself as a hard worker -Explaining short unemployment by national fiscal crises – external forces -Note: education is free in Denmark – so it must be money for rent etc. not education. -Being victim - forces out of her control – ill while pregnant, surgeries, etc. -Being out of control – chaos -Refusing to lose a valued self of a working identity -Emphasising own choice in fighting for education and health – I can do it myself -Exhibiting a heroic role in heroic struggle and humbleness by not taking up the spot from other people
Interviewer: Mhm.	
Client: Luckily, I have a husband, but I end up at [education institution] and [education institution], because I had to take a new education. I could not stay in the job I was initially trained for. So I was studying anew. And during the following few years I got surgery three times.	-Explaining educational obstacles -Legitimising a victim and hard-ship identity
Interviewer: Okay!	
Client: And I ended up surrendering at the doctors. We have been speaking about all of it being too much. At that time I was doing remote education and had a maximum of 15 hours a week. And I could not do it. I had to take medicine every day and I had a heart disease from which I was quite affected, and then I got medicine because I had my appendix removed, and I have something with my metabolism. My metabolism is chemical. And it has been so throughout the whole course of cancer disease. It is difficult to regulate. So it goes up and down and I am of cause very affected by that. It also means that I will never be a 100 % healthy again and I tried to navigate through that when I was at school. I had a very good supervisor and what can I say. He gave me permission to have sick days but it did not work and I had to go on sick leave again. And because I was receiving the state education funds, I could not go on sickness benefits but had to switch to unemployment benefits.	-Word 'surrendering' used to legitimise a heroic struggle -Emphasising that she did not want to give up but had to go with doctor's decision – external forces - Establishing sickness identity -Legitimising sickness by medicine and detailed medical history -Legitimising incomplete health with numbers '100%' -Characters: hero, victim and the supervisor as helper -Externalising the result of ending up on unemployment benefits - forces outside of her control

Appendix G: Coding example – article 3

Interview statement: Social worker, interview via Microsoft Teams	Initial coding	Focused coding	Categories
Interviewer: And how are digital technologies used in your encounters with a client? Social worker: First and foremost it happens via the phone now. That means that in contrast to us sitting and looking at each other via webcam, we do not have this eye contact. That means that you miss out on a lot. I do not have this sense of the clients to whom I talk to for the first time, so a lot of times I need to learn what is going on by **listening**. That means that a lot of information gets lost along with all the undescribed, how can I say this, all the communication in between, beyond the verbal. So it can be a hard thing to figure out sometimes. Also because I often use the eye contact and people's bodily positions to understand how they react on some of the things I say. So when I instigate something, because I do provoke them, and I do that on purpose sometimes because it can provoke a reaction and move them sometimes. But the point is that when I cannot see where we are with these things then it is easy to be misunderstood and sadly that is what happens a lot in phone conversations, in comparison to being face-to-face with a person.	-Comparing with interview situation -Missing out on eye contact -Missing the 'sense' of clients -Using hearing-sense – listening to what is going on -Losing information, the in-between sense -Provoking clients to move them -Misunderstanding in absence of visual cues	-missing out on symbolic cues of interaction - contrasting face-to-face interaction and phone conversations -describing inability to perform and direct the role of the 'provocateur' that moves the client	-defining problematic consequences of missing visual cues -missing out on non-verbal communication
Interviewer: Do you have an example of a situation when it has been difficult for you to sense this with a person? Social worker: well, I have a client at the moment who is struggling massively and who is very careful about what kind of information we gather about this person in question. And regarding the other thing. Now I am a bit crude, so understand me correctly when I say it like this. The client is mentally ill and I have spent, both before new years and after on working with the client on these things and what it is that he is bothered by. Sometimes we move forward and sometimes backwards. We spoke both Friday and yesterday and I have plans to call the client today as well. And it is a bit unusual with such frequent conversations but sometimes it makes sense. There is always a risk that we misinterpret one another because I can easily let something slip if I need some water and my voice is a bit rusty and I say something and it sounds crude to the client; and when they cannot read my face and see that I am smiling at the other end. Hence, they may misinterpret: Well [name] does not care about me. ..	-typifying client as careful with information -diagnosing client -defining goal and orientation of client case -what is at stake -establishing himself as a caring, unusual social worker -risking misinterpretation of his intent in absence of visual cues	-defining his social worker role as caring, unusual, moving the client -describing his 'line' of activities -defining what is at stake: his social worker role	-defining consequential outcomes for the client's trajectory by risk of misinterpretation -loosing control over the situation, risking role break
Interviewer: Okay, yes? Social worker: Therefore this risk is always present. I am worried that yesterday when I told the client: Now this is an important call, I have to take it. He may have felt turned down. If I could simply sit in front of the client. It is only normal communication with arms, legs, and the body, therefore, it is easier for them to non-verbally observe what is going on compared with when we talk on the phone. So, much information is lost.. And communication.	-note word 'risk' – worrying for the client's interpretation of his sentiments - grieving loss of 'normal' communication - grieving wrong presentation of himself in absence of cues	-risking 'face' as a social worker - missing non-verbal cues	-missing out on non-verbal communication

Appendix H: Transcription Key

Transcribe verbatim, however, all grammatical errors are corrected.

- If it is difficult to hear what was said but a good guess can be made, indicate this in italics.
- Sounds such as "um," "uh," are not transcribed unless they add meaning to the speaker's statement.
- Repeated words are not transcribed unless they are of significance.

If the interviewee or interviewer interrupts each other, it is indicated by "/", and if the interviewer or interviewee interrupts themselves mid-sentence and starts anew, it is also indicated by "/".

Abbreviations are used such as e.g. or etc.

Use **emboldening** if there is extra emphasis on a word, and utilise exclamation point if the statement is said with particular force.

Use CAPITAL LETTERS if the voice is raised.

Short pauses are indicated by two periods (..).

Longer pauses are indicated by […], meaning more than three seconds.

If the interviewee recounts a conversation involving multiple people, it is indicated with: " "

- For example: We got off the bus, and I said to my friend, "Wow, I got motion sick." She replied, "Oh, I'm sorry to hear that, I rather enjoyed the bus ride".

However, if it is just a recounting of their own thoughts or monologue, this is written after a colon without quotation marks.

- For example: We got off the bus, and I thought to myself: Wow, I got motion sick. But then some time passed, and I got over it.

Meaningful sounds, as well as comments from the interviewer such as interruptions due to a phone ringing or body language observations on how the interviewee seemed during the interview, are indicated in: [ ].

Sounds like coughs, grunts, etc., are not noted unless they constitute a significant meaning. Note: comments about the interviewee's emotional state, such as sounding particularly irritated or angry during a passage, are indicated in [ ].

Introductions and conclusions are noted within [ ] and are otherwise not transcribed, except for the very first interview.

Time stamps are used throughout the transcript, approximately every 5 minutes.

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