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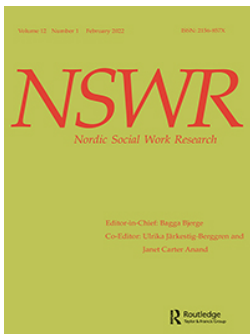
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Client documents in social work with adults as research data: scoping review of opportunities and challenges

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ABSTRACT

Documentation is an integral part of social work. It is a tool in client work, and it also has an accountability perspective. Documentation helps the practitioners to evaluate their own work and makes it possible to assess the impact of work and develop practices. The use of client documents for research purposes has been identified as an option, but it is still quite rare. Moreover, little attention has been paid to social work with adults in this context. The development of electronic information systems (EIS), including structured forms, presents new research opportunities. Through documentation, it is possible to make tacit information visible and obtain evidence, for example, about the effects of adult social work. The aim of this review is to examine the use of adult social work client documents in research: what kinds of documents are used as data, what are the aims and methods of the studies, and especially what opportunities and challenges are associated with the client documents as research data? The review finds that the methods and research topics are diverse. It indicates that documentation has a low status in adult social work, and recording practices are inadequate; this has implications for the client's position and involvement, the development and monitoring of social work, and the usability of such documents for research purposes. These findings are a matter of serious concern, and they are linked to the demanding working conditions and the recording cultures that prevail in organizations, as well as problems with information systems.

KEYWORDS

Social work with adults; recording; case files; case notes; documentation

Introduction

Documentation in social work has various functions. It often has a negative image, and it is perceived as a secondary and time-consuming task (Shaw et al. 2009; Gillingham 2011; McDonald et al. 2015; Lauri 2016; Lillis 2017). However, documentation and social work are closely intertwined. Documents are also recognized as valuable data and tools for knowledge formation (Kääriäinen 2003; Alexanderson et al. 2009), and their importance has only increased with the development of EIS. Still, there are challenges. From the practitioner's point of view, the EIS does not always serve practical work in the best possible way (Ylönen 2022; Gillingham 2021).

This scoping review centres on the use of adult social work documentation for research purposes as there appears to be limited research combining these topics. It is easier to find research on childcare and families that uses client documents as data (e.g. Baginsky, Manthorpe, and Moriarty 2020; Laird et al. 2017; Hoyle et al. 2019); research concerning social work with the elderly is also available (e.g. Chester et al. 2021; Storey and Perka 2018). One reason for this may be the diversity of social work with adults (Thompson 2002, 288). Social work with adults is a large and indeterminate

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field. In this study, adult social work is approached from a Finnish context. This partly delimits the data, and serves as a background for my further document study of the effects of adult social work in Finland. However, this does not exclude an international connection and exploitation of the findings, as the themes of adult social work and documentation are similar, and the review includes international research.

The aim of this scoping review is to generate information about the opportunities and challenges of documentation related to the research use of adult social work client documents. In addition, it maps the data and methods used as well as the topics studied. The review also contributes suggestions for improvement from the perspective of documentation. In what follows, I describe the key concepts and the scoping review method, and its application in this article according to the five stages of Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) framework. The findings section presents an overview of the data and its features, organized around the research questions. This is followed by a discussion and conclusion.

Key concepts

Documentation in social work

According to Askeland and Payne (1999), terms related to documentation internationally are 'case records', 'notes' or 'files', and 'case recording'. For clarity, in this article these terms are subsumed under the terms 'documents' and 'documentation'. Documentation can include written texts, video and audio recordings, photographs and drawings (Denscombe 2010). The functions and practices of documentation have altered over the years. It is still used for practice development, theory-building, research and teaching, as it was in the early 20th century (Reamer 2005). It also retains planning and monitoring functions (Prior 2003; Laaksonen et al. 2011; Lillis 2017). Reamer (2005) notes that risk management and the protection of clients, practitioners and employers is part of documentation. Documentation is regulated by law. It should be accurate, sufficient and timely. It should include only relevant information, and clients' privacy should be protected (2015/254).

Documentation is often considered time-consuming, boring, and 'just' an administrative task. It is believed to limit the time available for face-to-face work with clients, which is perceived as 'real social work' (Shaw et al. 2009; Gillingham 2011; McDonald et al. 2015; Lauri 2016; Lillis 2017). Standardized templates are considered inflexible, focusing on technical issues and decisions instead of on the content of conversations (Jacobsson and Martinell Barfoed 2019). The use of measurement in social work is criticized because it is associated with managerialism and the business world; it is considered to focus on outcomes rather than values (Vojak 2009; Bradt et al. 2011; Fook 2016; Phillips 2019). The complexity of information systems (IS) is also perceived as a challenge in the field (Shaw et al. 2009). According to Björngren Cuadra (2019), problems with IS stem from a lack of knowledge about frontline social work among IS designers, as well as the diversity of needs depending on the point of view taken.

Documentation is also recognized as a window onto the previous sociopolitical situations (Prior 2007; Vierula 2017). Systematicity, planning, goals and holistic assessments reduce 'drift', which is often seen as a problem (Thompson 2002). Documentation makes it possible to implement evidence- and knowledge-based ways of working (Alexanderson 2006). It provides a tool with which to assess goals and agree next steps with the client. Proper documentation is also important for accountability to clients (Lillis 2017). Documents make the process visible to all parties, including policymakers (Laaksonen et al. 2011). It is known that turnover in social work is high (Yliruka et al. 2020). Updated and accurate documentation helps with continuity in changing situations (Reamer 2005; Lillis 2017). Documentation may also develop one's professional identity and enables reflection (McDonald et al. 2015). Integrating and securing access to services requires proper documentation. Multiprofessional use of the plans and assessments contained in EIS is central, especially when clients have multiple illnesses and problems (Hujala and Lammintakanen

2018). Cooperation and the pooling of resources also has economic implications (e.g. Murray, Rodriguez, and Lewis 2020; Cheng and Catallo 2020).

The importance of client documents as a source from which to measure outcomes in evaluation research has grown over the years (e.g. Carrilio 2005, 2008). This is connected to development requirements in data management and recording practices, and increases the demands for structured recording. These needs have also been taken into account in Finland. There is, for example, an effectiveness evaluation tool called 'KEY' which is integrated into the client database system. It is used in services for people of working age. This tool is based on realistic evaluation, and it takes advantage of single case design and ICT (Kivipelto et al. 2015). Blom and Morén (2007, 2015) are also interested in the effects of social work and the mechanisms behind it, as well as the use of client documents in research. They have developed CAIMeR theory; a theory based on critical realism (Blom and Morén 2015). This theory takes mechanisms and contexts into account, and asks how and why certain outcomes occur in a particular context. This type of research, and the structured recording that enables it, is one way to highlight the effectiveness of social work that is perceived as difficult to achieve.

Until recently, the secondary use of client documents as a primary source in qualitative research was not particularly widespread. In the late 1990s, documentary research was alien to social work research (McCulloch 2004). Nevertheless, documentary research has a long history in sociology. Documentary investigation was the main research tool of classical sociologists such as Marx and Weber; it was later also used by social scientists such as Foucault and Bourdieu (Coffey 2014; Scott 1990). Documents are often perceived as supplementary data, giving background information and verifying other data sources (Prior 2007; Bowen 2009). The reliability of the data is considered a challenge: client documents have been described as selective, partial, and based on practitioners' interpretations of events (Floersch 2000). It must also be borne in mind that client documents are written for purposes other than research (Denscombe 2010).

Social work with adults

Any definition of adult social work faces dilemmas in relation to both the content and the terminology. Internet searches reveal that various combinations of terms are used. 'Adult social care' is mainly used on British webpages. The term 'safeguarding' also emerges in the context of social work with adults in the UK. In Finland, Finnish terms are used meaning 'social work with adults', 'social services for adults' and 'services for people of working age', although a direct Finnish translation of the English term 'adult social work' is commonly used. In the literature, the term 'social work with adults' is often used (e.g. Adams, Dominelli, and Payne 2002).

Thompson (2002, 288) notes the diversity of social work with adults but finds some common themes, such as the 'importance of seeking to empower people, to support them constructively in their efforts to retain as much control as possible over their lives, to remain as independent and autonomous as possible, and to remove or avoid barriers to enjoying a quality of life free from distress, disadvantage and oppression'. It is often stated that the nature of adult social work is unclear, and that it is less valued than child protection, which is often prioritized and seen as more complex. (ibid., Thompson 2002). Nonetheless, there is a strong interconnection between adult social work and child protection (e.g. Lymbery and Postle 2010).

Activation has become a key policy focus in the 21st century, with impacts on adult social work practice and clients (van Berkel et al. 2012; Hansen and Natland 2017). There is concern about clients who no longer have access to the labour market, raising the question of whether work with this group will become a secondary task in adult social work (Liukko 2006). Personalization – person-centred planning for individual needs and support, and individual payments in the form of personal budgets – has also become a central issue for those who are eligible for services (e.g. Lymbery 2012; Malbon, Carey, and Meltzer 2019).

In Finland, services are grouped according to a life cycle model: services for families with children, services for adults 18–64 years, and services for older people over 65 years (Karjalainen, Metteri, and Strömberg-Jakka 2019). This distinguishes Finland from many other countries, because older people are not primarily clients of adult social work (services for adults). Adult social work in Finland is located in municipal offices (Juhila 2008). It has strong link to social assistance (Karjalainen 2017), also called ‘income support’. Common issues that call for adult social work intervention are unemployment and livelihood problems, health issues, substance use, housing problems, criminal behaviour and family crises; often, these issues overlap (Juhila 2008; Karjalainen 2017). It is worth mentioning that older people or care leavers may also be clients of adult social work if the financial support is placed in connection with the adult social work services.

Methods

This article uses the scoping review method proposed by Arksey and O’Malley (2005). Scoping reviews can be undertaken to examine the extent, range and nature of a particular research activity (Arksey and O’Malley 2005). A scoping review does not necessarily describe previous research findings in detail. It rarely answers specific questions or assesses the quality of the studies reviewed. However, scoping is applicable when the field of interest is complex and difficult to grasp, and when reviews on the topic are not yet available. Scoping reviews are appropriate to inform practice, programmes and policy, and to provide directions for future research (Colquhoun et al. 2014). A scoping review is suitable for the topic of research on adult social work due to the topic’s complexity. According to previous research, there is a need for documentation-related improvements at many levels, and a scoping review may provide insight into this too.

The scoping study process is not linear, and it requires a reflexive approach, repeating each step to ensure that the literature is covered comprehensively. During the preparation of this article, I followed the five stages of Arksey and O’Malley’s (2005) framework: 1) identifying the research question; 2) identifying relevant studies; 3) making the study selection; 4) charting the data; 5) collating, summarizing and reporting the results.

By reading previous studies I first formulated and identified my research questions and definitions of my key concepts (‘document’, ‘documentation’ and ‘adult social work’). I thoroughly examined these questions concepts from the perspective of current practices and changes in social work, such as the evaluation of effectiveness, EIS, and functions and development of documents and documentation. As a result, I formulated the research questions as follows: *what kinds of documents are used as data in research? What are the research aims and methods? What are the opportunities and challenges associated with documents, documentation and their use as research data?*

I then started to identify and select relevant studies by conducting preliminary searches. The search strategy was piloted in autumn 2020, and the final searches were conducted systematically in electronic databases (Web of Science, Social Services Abstracts, Scopus and Sociological Abstracts) over a three-month period from January to March 2021. I tested different combinations of ‘adult’, ‘adult social work’, ‘social work/care/service’, ‘documentation’ and ‘case file(s)/note(s)/record(s)’. The use of ‘adult’ constrained the results excessively, and searches with ‘documentation’ yielded ineligible hits. The terms found to be most suitable were ‘case file(s)/note(s)/record(s)’.

Specific keywords used in the search were ‘social work OR social service OR social care AND recording OR records OR case file OR case note’, adapted to the search tools for each database and using the ‘anywhere except full text’ function. The criteria for inclusion were as follows: the topic included social work with adults (as understood in Finland and defined above); social services client documentation was used as data; the research was published in English in a peer-reviewed journal between January 2010 and March 2021. The period 2010–2021 was chosen because EIS have become more common during that time, and because of this the data has been easier to obtain for research purposes. It should be noted that in some of the selected studies, the age criteria (under 65 years or over 18 years) was only partially met. In these cases, there was flexibility in the age

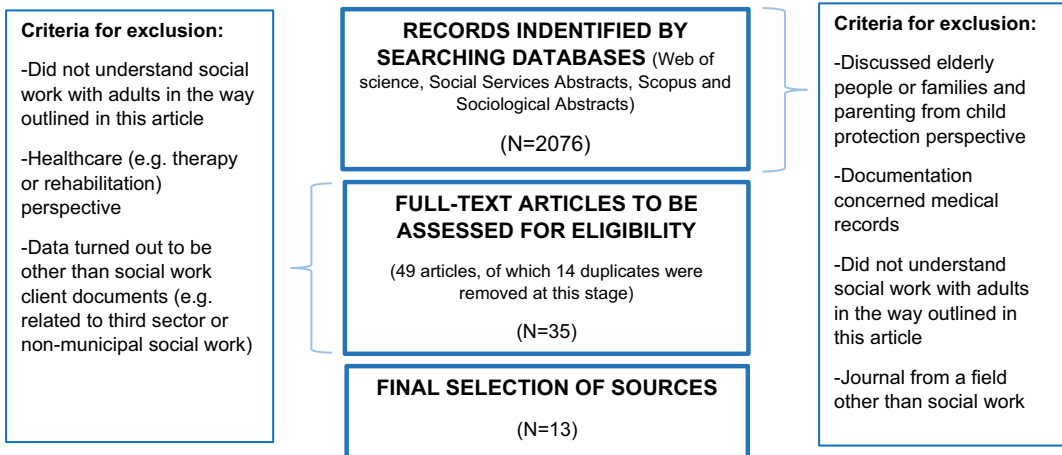


Figure 1. Study selection.

criteria if the topic suited the Finnish context, which was also one of the criteria. The criteria for exclusion were as follows: the definition of adult social work did not correspond to the context outlined for this article; the research discussed elderly people or families from child protection or parenting perspectives; the journal was in a field of health care; medical records were used as data; the language of publication was not English.

A total of 2076 records were identified through database searches. The decision to include or exclude was made by reading the titles and abstracts. If it was unclear whether my criteria (usually concerning the data or target group) were met, I read the paper's methodology section. Despite the large number of hits, only 49 met my inclusion criteria at the first round. At this stage, 14 duplicates were removed, leaving 35 articles. I then conducted a full-text review and closer examination of the data to verify the eligibility of the 35 articles. I excluded several articles at this point because they turned out to be related to healthcare or to have been produced by third-sector actors; adult social work did appear in these articles, but it was not understood in the way outlined above, or else the documents used had not been produced in a social work context. Ultimately, after careful reading, 13 articles were included (Figure 1).

The next step, data-charting, extracted the information (Table 1). Data-charting identifies general information about each study as well as specific information, such as the type of intervention, the outcome measures employed, and the study design (Arksey and O'Malley 2005). The final stage was collating and summarizing. I organized the data and marked up all the references in the articles to documents or documentation and noted their content. I then allocated all of the references to opportunities and challenges. I also marked up the methods and data used, and the aim of the research. These themes and their contents are summarized in my findings section below.

Findings

Data used in the studies

Terms describing the documents used as data appear in the *data* section in Table 1. The commonest sources of data were individual-level client documents extracted from electronic IS maintained by social welfare, or comparable documents collected within the framework of municipally funded projects (Skogens 2011; Hamilton et al. 2015; Trainor 2015; Papadakaki et al. 2013; Fernqvist 2018; Chotvijit, Thiarai, and Jarvis 2019; Choi and Chan 2020; Fontaine et al. 2020; Matscheck and Piuva 2020; Petersen and Parsell 2020). In one study only (Papadakaki et al. 2013), the documentation was done by hand on paper. In some cases, the data was supplemented by interviews (Papadakaki et al.

Table 1. Data-charting.

	Author, year of publication, journal	Aim of study	Data	Method
1	Fernqvist 2018 Critical and Radical Social Work	Asks how parents are portrayed in Swedish social service records regarding eviction risk, and how these individuals are constructed as clients with regard to notions of financial propriety	37 case records concerning income support where eviction risk is in some way evident, from four Swedish municipalities with varied population sizes and socio-economic profiles	Qualitative study Discourse theory: negotiations in texts regarding clients explored; texts analysed as discursive field within an institutional setting
2	Hamilton et al. 2015 Childcare in Practice: Northern Ireland Journal of Multi-Disciplinary Childcare Practice	Establishes the incidence of suicidal ideation and behaviour among young people leaving state care in one health and social care trust in Northern Ireland, and explores the correlation between this and client risk factors	164 case files from teams dealing with at-risk young people aged 16–21; open cases extracted by social workers using a standard data collection tool	Quantitative study Measurement of ‘suicidal ideation and behaviour’ and correlations between this and client risk factors
3	Scannapieco, Smith, and Blakeney-Strong 2016 Child & Adolescent Social Work Journal	Examines youth (ageing out of foster care) characteristics associated with better outcomes, and programme characteristics correlated with outcomes	Records from Transition Resource Action Centre (TRAC) in Texas and child protection services database; plus TRAC’s own follow-up notes and self-sufficiency matrix, used to determine outcomes	Quantitative study Causal comparative research design, with data analysed using descriptive, bivariate and multivariate statistics To determine outcomes, uses both TRAC’s self-sufficiency matrix (education, employment, employability, financial literacy and shelter) and case records
4	Papadakaki et al. 2013 Journal of Social Work	Explores social services department’s response to intimate partner violence cases in Greek university hospital	All electronic and handwritten registers and social history forms recorded between January 2005 and April 2009 at the social services department, and semi-structured interviews with ten social workers	Qualitative/quantitative study Content analysis (interviews) and quantitative data analysis (documentary data)
5	Choi and Chan 2020 Qualitative Social Work	Investigates the motives of Chinese women who use force in intimate relationships, changes after the use of force, and interventions provided	Case records from a community-funded domestic violence prevention project in Hong Kong between July 2011 and July 2014: a total of 41 women identified, of whom 12 gave consent for their case records to be reviewed	Qualitative study Retrospective analysis of case records Clinical data-mining and thematic analysis
6	Fyson 2015 British Journal of Social Work	Asks how the adult safeguarding database was populated from case records and how the resultant data was utilized	Adult safeguarding database including all data collected by one English local authority, plus semi-structured interviews with safeguarding managers from adult social care and health teams	Qualitative/quantitative study Statistical analysis of information from adult safeguarding database; analysis of a sample of recent safeguarding adult assessment outcomes; thematic content analysis of interviews
7	Chotvijit, Thiarai, and Jarvis 2019 British Journal of Social Work	Examines the flow and continuity of data, from referral through the assessment process to the resulting service provision	Structured assessment and service agreements extracted from Birmingham City Council’s CareFirst information system	Quantitative study Data analysis methods, pre-processing scripts and statistical tool used

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

	Author, year of publication, journal	Aim of study	Data	Method
8	Trainer 2015 <i>Journal of Adult Protection</i>	Looks at safeguarding documentation in adult safeguarding files, with a view to redesigning and developing practice	50 service user files from one health and social care trust area in the UK between 1 April 2010 and 31 March 2011, plus semi-structured interviews	Qualitative/quantitative study File review tool used: personal characteristics, nature of alleged abuse, and decisions/outcomes Quantitative data analysed using SPSS; thematic analysis used to interpret qualitative information
9	Petersen and Parsell 2020 <i>British Journal of Social Work</i>	Explores links between older people's homelessness and family relationships	561 case records from agencies in Australia working with older people in housing crisis	Qualitative study Data-mining with data abstraction tool that researchers provided to agencies, where tool included demographic details, critical housing incident underpinning the referral, brief housing history, living circumstances, and support intervention provided Qualitative analysis
10	Fontaine et al. 2020 <i>International Journal of Qualitative Methods</i>	Investigates the process of adapting the Listening Guide for use as qualitative data, including challenges, opportunities and limitations perceived and encountered	191 text-based entries from a collaboration among social service agencies serving financially strained immigrants: researchers exported case notes from January to March 2019 from Zoho IDS.4, a shared platform for the funder and collaborating agencies	Qualitative study Listening Guide and clinical data-mining methodologies
11	Matscheck and Piuva 2020 <i>European Journal of Social Work</i>	Asks what can be learned about conditions for integrated care according to the degree of collaboration, involvement of the individual user, and supporting structures	25 case files from a local authority, including coordinated individual plans: seven local authorities were contacted, and the one close to Stockholm with the greatest number of CIPs for the target group during the specified period was chosen	Qualitative study Analysed with reference to two existing models, comparing each finding with relevant elements of the models
12	Ismail et al. 2017 Journal of Social Policy	Explores whether available data can provide evidence of association between the uptake of personal budgets and safeguarding referrals	2209 individual referral records from combined returns data on the abuse of vulnerable adults and adult social care; plus separate individual-level data from three purposively selected councils; plus interviews	Quantitative study Quantitative, in-depth analysis
13	Skogens 2011 <i>European Journal of Social Work</i>	Investigates connections in case files between clients' labour market status and how their drinking problem is handled	Case files from social welfare offices in nine municipalities within the suburban area of Stockholm County from 1999 to 2004, dealing with social assistance granted to single men with recurrent or long-term contact; alcohol-related notes were present in 297 case files, and a sample of 30 case files was studied	Quantitative study Protocol used to collect data from case files: client's age, year of first contact with social welfare office, ability to support himself through work, and notes on decisions made and type of action taken by social worker in relation to client's alcohol or drug use Category analysis

2013; Fyson 2015; Trainor 2015; Ismail et al. 2017). The data also included documents containing statistical information that had been collected from client documents for monitoring purposes (Fyson 2015; Scannapieco, Smith, and Blakeney-Strong 2016; Ismail et al. 2017). The sample sizes varied from just over ten to more than 200,000 individuals. As might be expected, sample sizes were smaller in qualitative studies (e.g. Skogens 2011; Fernqvist 2018; Choi and Chan 2020; Matscheck and Piuva 2020) than in quantitative studies (e.g. Chotvijit, Thiarai, and Jarvis 2019). The time frame for which the data was collected ranged between three months and seven years.

Aims and methods of the studies

A common theme of the studies was to produce knowledge and information for practice. The studies roughly fell into two groups. The first group shared an interpretive approach. Their aim was to identify explanations, causes or contexts for various factors and their influence on a particular phenomenon (Skogens 2011; Hamilton et al. 2015; Scannapieco, Smith, and Blakeney-Strong 2016; Ismail et al. 2017; Choi and Chan 2020; Petersen and Parsell 2020). The second group was oriented towards practice research and development, offering suggestions for the improvement of current practice (Fyson 2015; Papadakaki et al. 2013; Trainor 2015; Chotvijit, Thiarai, and Jarvis 2019; Matscheck and Piuva 2020). Two of the 13 studies selected did not fall in either of these two groups. One of these studies explored a new method and tested it on documentary data (Fontaine et al. 2020). The other was a discursive study examining the construction of clients' income support case records; the underlying idea was that documents are tools for the exercise of control and power (Fernqvist 2018).

Thus, across all 13 studies, both qualitative (Fernqvist 2018; Choi and Chan 2020; Fontaine et al. 2020; Matscheck and Piuva; Petersen and Parsell 2020) and quantitative (Skogens 2011; Hamilton et al. 2015; Scannapieco, Smith, and Blakeney-Strong 2016; Ismail et al. 2017; Chotvijit, Thiarai, and Jarvis 2019) methods were used. There were also mixed methods studies (Fyson 2015; Trainor 2015; Papadakaki et al. 2013). These studies used documents as supplementary quantitative data regarding background information and sociodemographic details. In these studies, the primary qualitative data was collected by interviewing. As methods of analysis, the qualitative studies used discourse analysis (Fernqvist 2018), thematic analysis (Trainor 2015; Choi and Chan 2020) and qualitative analysis (Petersen and Parsell 2020). The quantitative studies used a variety of statistical methods, examining correlations (Hamilton et al. 2015), causalities (Scannapieco, Smith, and Blakeney-Strong 2016), personal characteristics and frequency of phenomena (Trainor 2015; Papadakaki et al. 2016), the continuity of stages in the client process (Chotvijit, Thiarai, and Jarvis 2019), and categories (Skogens 2011). In-depth analysis (Ismail et al. 2017) and analysis using conceptual models was also conducted (Matscheck and Piuva 2020).

The studies implemented non-random data selection (Scannapieco, Smith, and Blakeney-Strong 2016) or – as in most of the studies – selected data based on the occurrence in the documents of certain phenomena, such as unemployment and substance abuse (Skogens 2011), suicide risk (Hamilton et al. 2015), homelessness (Petersen and Parsell 2020) or violence (Choi and Chan 2020). In some studies, either the social workers or the researchers themselves used data-mining and data collection tools to gather demographic details and other relevant information (Choi and Chan 2020; Fontaine et al. 2020; Petersen and Parsell 2020).

Opportunities and challenges of documentation and research use

My analysis of the studies mainly identified challenges regarding documentation in general, which also related to the challenges of research use. Opportunities were not identified to the same extent. The documentation and assessment processes appeared to be complex (Chotvijit, Thiarai, and Jarvis 2019), and several problems were linked to them. There were indications that documentation was experienced as an obligation. For example, a new documentation policy seemed to be

implemented mainly because it had been ordered from higher up the hierarchy (Matscheck and Piuva 2020). The documented texts were often unclear; for example, it was difficult to find the context or participants in the documents (Fernqvist 2018; Matscheck and Piuva 2020). The reasons identified for inadequate documentation were the provision of unsuitable tools such as inappropriate templates (Fyson 2015; Scannapieco, Smith, and Blakeney-Strong 2016), a lack of time in the face of increasing client numbers, and frustration with repetition in the documentation (Fyson 2015). This manifested in the use of journals instead of ready-made forms, and in incomplete documentation processes that made it difficult to see how the process with a client had progressed (Chotvijit, Thiarai, and Jarvis 2019; Matscheck and Piuva 2020). Incomplete, unsystematic documentation, variability in the use of EIS, constant changes in terminology, and differences in practice were considered to have affected the quality and reliability of research data (Skogens 2011; Fyson 2015; Papadakaki et al. 2013; Scannapieco, Smith, and Blakeney-Strong 2016; Ismail et al. 2017; Chotvijit, Thiarai, and Jarvis 2019).

The consequences of poor documentation were also discussed. Among other things, cooperation and information exchange among actors was found to be difficult, which in turn might threaten clients' access to services. Challenges were also identified in the design of cost-effective services (Chotvijit, Thiarai, and Jarvis 2019), and long-term goals and monitoring became difficult due to poor documentation (Matscheck and Piuva 2020). Deficiencies in documentation had impacts on resourcing. The growing workload could not be verified – if there was no recorded data, there could be no additional resources (Fyson 2015). Other challenges were small sample sizes and the production of data by a single individual which reduced generalizability (Trainor 2015; Ismail et al. 2017; Chotvijit, Thiarai, and Jarvis 2019; Choi and Chan 2020; Matscheck and Piuva 2020). Discretion, interpretation, and the situationality of documents were also mentioned as limiting factors (Skogens 2011; Fernqvist 2018; Choi and Chan 2020; Fontaine et al. 2020; Petersen and Parsell 2020). The exploration of client documents was also time-consuming (Matscheck and Piuva 2020).

One opportunity-related factor was that secondary use of materials could save the researcher time and money (Fontaine et al. 2020). Client documents also enabled the exploration of sensitive topics while maintaining privacy and offering objective descriptions (Choi and Chan 2020), as well as granting access 'below the surface' (Fontaine et al. 2020). Negative features, such as the appearance of shortcomings in the documentation, were also identified as opportunities insofar as they allowed the problem in question to be addressed (Fyson 2015; Papadakaki et al. 2013). Here it was considered important to reflect on the relevance of documentation and the development of document templates. Researchers noted that improvements were needed to obtain accurate information. New templates should be piloted before final deployment, 'forced choices' such as key demographic data should be included, and the harmonization of terminology was necessary (Fyson 2015; Chotvijit, Thiarai, and Jarvis 2019). Changes in practices and habits were found to require front-level authorization (Matscheck and Piuva 2020).

Discussion and conclusion

The findings reveal that adult social work documents are used as research data in various ways: as background material, to explain particular phenomena and causalities, or for development purposes. Qualitative and quantitative methods are used equally; mixed methods are also deployed.

However, my findings suggest that the varying quality of the documentation and other related problems are obstacles to the exploitation of documents in practice, research and development. Although the measurement of outcomes (Carrilio 2005, 2008) and its connection to documentation has long been discussed, there are still major problems in the production of information for these purposes. It seems that EIS are unable to fulfil their own informational mission with regard to social work as it has been noted also in previous studies (Shaw et al. 2009; Björngren Cuadra 2019). Not only in order to measure outcomes, but also to highlight challenges and correct problems in

documentation, the use of documents as research data should be both continued and expanded. Studies that use documents as data are often oriented towards interventions and results. The potential to deepen the use of documents as data could be further exploited to identify how and why certain outcomes occur in particular contexts, as Blom and Morén (2015) suggest.

My findings show that working conditions affect the quality of documentation. Poor documentation and its practices were addressed in more than half the studies I analysed. If adult social work were viewed solely in the light of client documents, it would appear rather unsystematic and unplanned. This is obviously not the whole truth. As is known, workloads are huge, and there is limited time for documentation (Shaw et al. 2009; Gillingham 2011; McDonald et al. 2015; Lauri 2016; Lillis 2017). Lack of time and unsuitable tools may lead to incorrect recording, as may lack of knowledge and even deliberate resistance.

Conducting social work in the field under challenging circumstances has adverse consequences. It is often said that what is not recorded has not happened. In that regard, imbalances in resources or work allocations are linked to documentation, as my findings demonstrate (Fyson 2015). Missing or incomplete documents do not give the whole picture of the work done, and this in turn provides managers with insufficient evidence of the need for additional resources or amended working arrangements. The result is a vicious circle. The poor state of documentation may reflect a larger picture of the challenges in social work practice. Gradually, poor working conditions come to be perceived as necessary evils about which nothing can be done, and this is again reflected in the shortcomings of documentation. Indifferent attitudes emerge, and sometimes changing one's job appears to be the only way out. As is known, the turnover of employees in the field of social work is high (e.g. Yliruka et al. 2020). Because of the constant churn, views and visions of the work may narrow; for example, the importance of documentation, and the employee's own role in it, may not be recognized in terms of benefits.

The benefits of documentation have been presented in previous studies from the perspectives of clients, employees and the wider context (Thompson 2002; Reamer 2005; Alexanderson 2006; Carrilio 2005, 2008; McDonald et al. 2015; Lillis 2017). Building a common understanding of these benefits would help to get to grips with the many levels of documentation. This would require shared willingness and discussion to improve documentation practices. Commitment and involvement at the management level are a crucial part of this. In addition, grassroots involvement in planning to make changes to recording practices and EIS should be taken into account, and care should be taken to implement each change properly before making the next. Consistency of documentation would enable the automatic extraction of statistical and register information at the national level, which is important to defend and develop social work in a way that recognizes clients' needs and makes social work visible. This could be achieved by (among other things) improving working conditions, and by assessing resources and working methods in a way that makes systematic documentation and client participation in documentation possible. This in turn would strengthen the legal framework from a client perspective, offer a structured process, and provide better opportunities for the secondary use of documents and the construction of more reliable data. Investment in documentation might open the door – or the black box, as Blom and Morén (2015) put it – to more in-depth research that uses documents as data, answering questions about how and why changes have taken place, and discovering not only the results but also the context of specific interventions.

Limitations

The complexity of the terminology meant that searches based on it left room for interpretation. In particular, the term 'social work with adults' was difficult to define and grasp in an international context. The inclusion criterion in the study was to limit the concept of social work with adults to the Finnish context. As a result, only a small percentage of the search results met the criteria. If the study had been conducted in the context of another country, the results would probably have been

different. It should also be noted that the review was conducted by a single individual. This limited the scope and selection of the articles. While this limitation was accepted for practical reasons, it is worth pointing out that potentially relevant papers may have been missed, and a different researcher might have made different choices.

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