Social Work Between Theory and Practice: *Present and Future*

Editors:
Remus RUNCAN
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Alina COSTIN
Liliana Renate BRAN

Presa Universitară Clujeană

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2026

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Book editor: PhD Student Rahela Anemona BAN
Proofreader: Dr. habil. Iasmina IOSIM

ISBN 978-606-37-3037-5

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Str. B.P. Hasdeu nr. 51
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editura.ubbcluj.ro | libraria.ubbcluj.ro

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Foreword

This volume brings together the scientific contributions presented at the second edition of the *International Conference on Social Work Practice, Health and Education*, an event dedicated to one of the most urgent and complex challenges of our time: **how to build trust and solidarity in societies marked by uncertainty, fragmentation, and rapid transformation**. Hosted in Arad, Romania, on 14–15 October 2025, the conference gathered researchers, practitioners, educators, and students from diverse disciplinary and cultural backgrounds, united by a shared commitment to strengthening the theoretical foundations and practical relevance of contemporary social work.

The theme of this edition – *Building Trust and Solidarity for a Good Society* – was not chosen lightly. Across Europe and beyond, social workers confront the consequences of demographic ageing, migration, digitalization, inequality, trauma, and the erosion of community bonds. These challenges demand not only technical expertise, but also ethical clarity, interdisciplinary collaboration, and a renewed capacity to translate theory into meaningful, context-sensitive practice. The papers included in this volume reflect precisely this ambition: to bridge conceptual frameworks with lived realities, and to illuminate the ways in which social work can remain both scientifically grounded and deeply humane.

The conference papers and research studies included in this volume were developed under the aegis of the European Institute "Serge Moscovici", an academic and scientific structure within the “Aurel Vlaicu” University of Arad. Through its activity of promoting interdisciplinary research and academic dialogue, the institute provides an institutional framework dedicated to the development of scientific studies and projects in the field of social sciences and humanities, thus contributing to the consolidation of research efforts and the dissemination of scientific knowledge.

Structured into six thematic chapters, this volume offers a panoramic yet coherent exploration of the field’s present concerns and future directions.

Chapter 1 revisits the philosophical, ethical, and theoretical foundations of social work, highlighting the need for reflective practice, evidence-based intervention, and value-driven decision-making. The contributions examine models ranging from theological paradigms of care to contemporary correctional theories and ethical dilemmas in professional conduct.

Chapter 2 turns to community dynamics, migration, and social capital, offering systemic analyses of cohesion, resilience, and the social transformations reshaping rural and urban environments. The studies emphasize the importance of trust-building, participatory engagement, and the role of volunteering in shaping future professionals.

Chapter 3 addresses ageing, disability, and vulnerability – domains where social work plays a decisive role in safeguarding dignity and promoting well-being. The authors explore active ageing, the psychosocial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the intersection of digitalization with the rights and quality of life of persons with severe disabilities.

Chapter 4 focuses on mental health, trauma, and therapeutic interventions, with particular attention to experiential approaches, interdisciplinary collaboration, and the long-term effects of institutionalization and abuse. These contributions underscore the necessity of trauma-informed, community-anchored practices.

Chapter 5 examines the digital turn in social life – cyberbullying, digital literacy, and the reproduction of inequalities in technologically mediated education. The analyses reveal both the opportunities and the risks of digitalization, urging social workers and educators to adopt critical, inclusive, and ethically responsible strategies.

Chapter 6 brings the discussion into the educational sphere, exploring resilience, school psychology, student wellbeing, and the role of social workers in preventing crises and fostering solidarity within school communities. The studies highlight the transformative potential of experiential learning, inclusive curricula, and psychosocial support.

Taken together, these contributions form a rich, interdisciplinary tapestry that reflects the evolving identity of social work as both a scientific discipline and a profession rooted in human connection. They demonstrate that **trust and solidarity are not abstract ideals, but practical resources**, cultivated through informed action, ethical responsibility, and sustained collaboration across sectors.

This volume stands as a testament to the intellectual vitality and social relevance of the conference, and to the dedication of all those who work daily to improve the lives of individuals, families, and communities. It invites readers – scholars, practitioners, policymakers, and students alike – to engage critically with the ideas presented here and to continue the collective effort of shaping a more just, compassionate, and cohesive society.

We extend our gratitude to all contributors, reviewers, and organizers whose commitment made this publication possible, and to the participants whose dialogue and presence enriched the conference. May this volume serve not only as a record of scholarly exchange but also as an inspiration for future research, practice, and innovation in the field of social work.

The Editors

CHAPTER 1. SOCIAL WORK THEORY, ETHICS & PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

Biblical Theology of Atonement: A Paradigm for a Christian Approach to Social Work

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Abstract. *The biblical doctrine of atonement can serve as a guide and paradigm for a Christian approach to social work. We will examine four biblical texts (Leviticus 16:1-28, Isaiah 53:1-12, Hebrews 9:1-28, and Matthew 26:26-29) to underline the development of sacrifice and atonement from the Old Testament as it culminates in the final fulfilment in Christ's substitutionary death. As we trace this biblical theological development, we identify four pillars for constructing a Christian approach to social work: the idea of sacrifice that considers the human dignity of all persons, the need for empathy with a clear focus on social work clients, the importance of systemic and transformative restoration, and the emergence of hope which is rooted in a network of relationships (a site of hope) as well as in the eschatological promises. In a world that becomes increasingly complex and fragmented, the Christian approach suggested in this paper brings coherence, clarity, and efficiency to the practice of contemporary social work.*

Keywords: *atonement, biblical theology, Christian social work, substitutionary sacrifice, empathy, systemic restoration, hope.*

1. Introduction

The theme of the atonement is essential in biblical theology. According to canonical revelation, the atonement for people's sins is possible only by blood, foreshadowed in the *Old Testament* through animal sacrifices, but fully realized through the once-and-for-all death of Jesus Christ, who offered his life as the Lamb of God. How is the doctrine of atonement functioning if we correlate it with social work? This question deserves our attention because social work is motivated by genuine care for our neighbours, and love and care also lie at the heart of the doctrine of atonement.

The contribution of this paper is not merely to emphasize the connection between the doctrine of atonement and social work through the idea of love, but to identify multiple connections between the two. These connections will provide a framework for a Christian approach and perspective in social work. Specifically, we will focus on four key biblical texts – *Leviticus 16:1-28*, *Isaiah 53:1-12*, *Hebrews 9:1-28*,

and *Matthew 26:26-29* – with the aim of understanding how each text contributes to the development of the doctrine of atonement and how they may serve in building our social work paradigm.

2. The Need for Sacrifice: *Leviticus 16:1-28*

A very significant *Old Testament* text that reveals the scope of the atonement – "the whole community of Israel" – is *Leviticus 16*. This chapter contains instructions given by God to Moses in the Sinai wilderness, after the tragic death of Aaron's sons, explaining how the high priest may approach God and establishing the annual feast of "The Day of Atonement". As such, *Leviticus 16* is placed between two essential sections of the book: *Chapters 11-15,* which describe various laws related to ritual uncleanness, and *Chapters 17-20*, which exhort the Israelites to holiness.

Given this context, *Chapter 16* fits very well between two narratives emphasizing the people's uncleanness and the demand for holiness. It serves as a reconciling section, clarifying that sinful people can be forgiven only through blood sacrifice. The truth that, without a sacrifice or shedding of blood, there can be no forgiveness (*Hebrews 9:22*, New International Version [NIV, here and the following]) is first anticipated in the *Old Testament*, immediately after the Fall, when God had to sacrifice animals as a means to provide a covering (clothes) for Adam and his wife, Eve (*Genesis 3:21*). Following the history of redemption, as God freed the people of Israel from Egypt and revealed to them the requirements of the Law, "atonement is to be made once a year for all the sins of the Israelites" (*Leviticus, 16:34*), an event that took place on the tenth day of the seventh month (*Tishri*). This special day was suggestively called יוֹם כִּפּוּר (*Yom Kippur*) or "The Day of Atonement". The atonement is necessary because sinfulness is an obstacle between the Israelites and a holy God, as exemplified in the death of the two sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, who brought unauthorized fire before the Lord (*Leviticus 10:1-2*). Therefore, in *Leviticus 16*, Moses is instructed by God to have Aaron enter the Most Holy Place of the Tabernacle – where the ark of the covenant was located – through a rigorous observance of blood sacrifices.

Specifically, the high priest had to bring two offerings, "a young bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering" (*Leviticus 16:3*), two of the five types of sacrifices mentioned in the book of *Leviticus* (see *Chapters 1-7*). After bathing himself and putting on sacred garments, the priest took from the community of Israel "two male goats for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering" (*Leviticus 16:5*). Aaron brought the bull as a sin offering for himself and his extended family, and then he cast lots for two goats; one falling for the Lord was sacrificed as a sin offering and one chosen as a scapegoat was sent into the wilderness (*Leviticus 16:10*). We can understand this ritual as underlining two facets of atonement – on one hand, God forgives the sinner and, on

the other hand, He is removing his transgressions from him as far as possible, as the east is from the west (*Psalms 103:12*).

Before sending the scapegoat into the wilderness, Aaron laid, symbolically, his hands on the head of the animal, confessing the sins of the Israelites. This points to the substitutionary nature of the atonement and its scope – all sins were put on the goat's head! This is not merely a ritual for forgiveness of the "unknown sins"; it also includes intentional sins. The term פֶּשַׁע (*pesaʿ*) in *Leviticus 16:16* includes any intentional violation of God's law. This word underscores the community's readiness to seek its own good without God, and it encompasses any violation of the first four commandments of the ten commandments (Hartley, 1992).

The forgiveness of sin is certain and effective because the blood of the animal offerings was brought into the Most Holy Place and sprinkled before the atonement cover (*Leviticus 16:14*), which was above the tablets of the covenant law. The image is stunning: the tablets meet the blood! As impressive as it may be, there is a clear textual indication that the provision for the forgiveness of sins, as stipulated under the old covenant, is temporary; the Day of Atonement is an annual celebration involving a repeated sacrifice: "This is to be a lasting ordinance for you: Atonement is to be made once a year for all the sins of the Israelites" (*Leviticus 16:34*). The annual recurrence of atoning sacrifices should not take people by surprise because "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (*Hebrews 10:4*).

Social work, in its complex and diverse manifestations, shares a sacrificial approach. Not only the social workers, but all caring networks (family, friends, church, support groups, State policies, etc.) connected to this activity should develop a sacrificial mindset if genuine help for people is to be envisioned. This sacrificial approach is non-discriminative because it does not seek social work beneficiaries who "deserve" help if they meet certain social, religious, or political criteria. The approach is justified based on human dignity, a universal value: "Human dignity connotes that all human beings possess equal and inherent value and should be accorded respect regardless of gender, sexuality, age, race or ethnicity, health, religion, socioeconomic status, political affiliations, or any other socially constructed classification." (Gatenio Gabel, 2024, 11).

The globalized world of the 21st century is extremely diverse across every aspect of life, and this reality is challenging. There is a growing tendency toward a tribalist mindset (Fox, 2019), helping only those who resemble us in terms of religion, race, or something else. However, social work should be practiced with sacrifice and generosity, serving as a binder for a fragmented society. Certainly, the doctrine of atonement is helping us reach this goal, and as the history of redemption unfolds, we increasingly understand that only an empathetic Person can both atone for people's sins and practice sacrificial social work. The book of *Isaiah* will shed more light on this subject.

3. The Mirror of Empathy: *Isaiah 53:1-12*

A particularly significant section in the book of Isaiah is the one containing four songs or poems (42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-11; and 52:13-53:12) that speak of the chosen Servant of the Lord, a messianic figure who will bring justice and salvation to the world. Arguably, *Isaiah 53* is the most well-known of the four poems, and it portrays a suffering Servant who is ready to sacrifice Himself to save sinners. Thus, Isaiah, by divine inspiration, picks up the theme of blood and atonement mentioned in *Leviticus 16*. Some noticeable Levitical overtones can be traced in the idea of a sin offering brought by the Servant (*Isaiah 53:10*) and the vivid comparison of Him being sacrificed as a lamb who chose silence and submission even though he was oppressed and afflicted in many ways (*Isaiah 53:7*).

Moreover, the theme of a substitutionary death on behalf of sinners (*Leviticus 16:21*) is further explored in Isaiah with much clarity. Creating a "cascade effect", the prophet brings home the notion of substitutional atonement: "he took up our pain and bore our suffering" (*Isaiah 53:4*), "he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities" (*Isaiah 53:5*), "the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (*Isaiah 53:6*), "for the transgression of my people he was punished" (*Isaiah 53:8*), "he will bear their iniquities" (*Isaiah 53:11*), "for he bore the sin of many" (*Isaiah 53:12*). This strong focus of Isaiah on the substitutionary death of the Servant is explainable. Motyer (1993, 432) comments: "The towering theological genius of Isaiah is nowhere more apparent than here. Substitutionary sacrifice lay at the heart of his own experience of God."

However, a key element noticeable in the text is the identity of the substitutionary blood sacrifice, namely "a man of suffering and familiar with pain" (*Isaiah 53:3*). Unlike the animals mentioned in *Leviticus 16*, the One being put to death in *Isaiah 53* is a human being who is ready to freely give His life as a penalty for the sins of many. Who is this Person, in any case? As the text unveils, He is „like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground" (Isaiah 53:2). He is clearly a messianic figure because the tender „shoot" יוֹנֵק (*yô·nēq'*) is reminiscent of *Isaiah 11:1*, where "the shoot from the stump of Jesse" is endowed with the Spirit of the Lord and ushers in a New Kingdom (Isaiah 11:1-9). Furthermore, we know that David was born from the "stump of Jesse" (*1 Samuel 16:1*) but, as David was not alive when Isaiah wrote his prophecy, we conclude that the prophet is speaking about a future "David" who, is indeed, the Servant of the Lord. That this future descendant of Jesse is a messianic figure is evident in the salvific and eschatological effects wrought by the suffering Servant. These results include peace and healing (*Isaiah 52:5*), He "will see his offspring" and „the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand" (*Isaiah 53:10*), many will be justified (*Isaiah 53:11*), and the Servant will have "a portion among the great" (*Isaiah 53:12*).

One last thing, not to be overlooked, is that the prophet asks a rhetorical question, right at the beginning of the chapter: "Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" (*Isaiah 53:1*). This is an indication that the Servant's identity and mission demand a response from the Israelites and, by extension, from other people who hear the message of God and receive the revelation that God is at work among people. Isaiah's prophetic message adds something important to our profile of a Christian approach and perspective on social work, namely empathy. We have seen that the suffering Servant pays the price on behalf of sinners, which clearly indicates an empathetic, substitutionary manifestation of love and action. An effective social work practice cannot be done without the ingredient of empathy. Although it is a broad concept, empathy includes an affective matching between the observer and the observed other, imagining how we might experience what other people go through, and an understanding that while we maintain our own identity, we connect with other people in a very significant way (Segal *et al*., 2017).

Empathy, as noted above, is keeping "the other" (the client) as the focal point of social work. This is important because there is always a risk of drifting from the genuine goal of social work (helping others) towards supporting the vision and objectives of certain NGOs or other institutions, without meeting needs in the field. Therefore, empathy functions as a mirror, helping the social worker continually evaluate and calibrate his actions in Favor of beneficiaries, much as Jesus Christ loved people and acted on their behalf.

4. Systemic Restoration: *Hebrews 9:1-28*

Moving into the *New Testament*, *Hebrews 9* clearly shows the continuity/discontinuity between the blood sacrifices under the old covenant and the sacrifice of the new covenant. Before delving into this matter, though, we should bear in mind that the identity of the Servant mentioned by the prophet Isaiah is disclosed: the shoot of Jesse, the future "David", is Jesus Christ. The allusion to *2 Samuel 7:14* – a promise made to David – is evident when we read: "You are my Son; today I have become your Father" (*Hebrews 1:5*). Here, the author is identifying Jesus as the ultimate "son of David", while he also established that Jesus is the "radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (*Hebrews 1:3*). We acknowledge that not only is the suffering Servant a descendant of David, but He is also a divine Person, God incarnated. It is no surprise whatsoever that the book of *Hebrews* emphasizes the superiority of Christ over the angels (*Chapter 1*), Moses (*Chapter 3*), Joshua (*Chapter 4*), the Levitical priesthood (*Chapter 5*), etc. The discussion about the new covenant, as opposed to the old covenant, takes place in the same climate of Jesus' superiority. While the idea of atonement exemplifies the continuity between the two covenants through a blood sacrifice, the discontinuity is remarkable: Jesus Christ has brought a sacrifice,

once and forever, making the Old Covenant and its subsequent sacrificial system obsolete (*Hebrews 8:13*). Williamson (2000, 427) considers that the "newness of the new covenant must not be underestimated; it incorporates novel elements in radical discontinuity with the past (cf. *Jer. 31:32*): the complete removal of sin (*Jer. 31:34*; *Ezek. 36:29, 33*); inner transformation of the heart (*Jer. 31:33*; *Ezek. 36:26*); an intimate relationship with God (*Jer. 31:34a*; *Ezek. 36:27*)."

Thus, the atonement, effected by the blood of Christ, grants the believers unhindered access in the presence of God, whereas under the Old Covenant, only the high priest was permitted to enter the Most Holy Place, once a year. Such an amazing result, unthinkable in the *Old Testament*, is possible on account of Christ, who "did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption" (*Hebrews 9:12*).

Moreover, unlike the blood of animals, the sacrifice of Christ "cleanses our consciences" because this blood is precious and efficient. There is no reminder of our sins through perpetual animal sacrifices (*Hebrews 10:3*). Christ died once and for all to permanently solve the problem of sin (*Hebrews 9:26*). Besides the fact that sin is not imputed to believers anymore, those who live under the new covenant can receive the eternal inheritance (Hebrews 9:15). This is possible because the blood of Christ puts into effect the will of God and brings to fulfilment those promises that are solely based on the perfect work of Jesus Christ. The old covenant was also actualized by blood (*Hebrews 9:18*); however, that covenant was contingent upon keeping the laws.

Beyond the themes of sacrifice and empathy, the insights from the book of Hebrews are highly relevant to our social work framework. A Christian approach to social work aims at systemic restoration, that is, addressing the root problems and all the diverse factors involved. Helping social work beneficiaries does not mean meeting a specific challenge or issue in isolation from the complex systems in which people live. Real, lasting help is ambitious and engages a systemic approach, including the restoration of rights and people's places in society. The social workers aim to empower people and communities to stand up for their rights, and, on the other hand, to encourage governments to respect those rights. When governments drift away from protecting and promoting these rights, social workers are to remind governments and hold them accountable for their obligations (Gabel, *op. cit.*).

The Christian approach and perspective in social work call for an architectural perspective, constructing new mentalities, new legal frameworks, and bridges among multiple societal actors. Only such an approach is suitable for the idea of restoring people in a way that prevents them from falling into the same social difficulties they previously faced.

5. The Reality of Hope: *Matthew 26:26-29*

Matthew 26:26-29 portrays Jesus as the founder and mediator of a new covenant. Being together with His disciples at the Passover Meal, shortly before going to the cross, Jesus takes the bread and the cup of wine and gives these elements a new meaning: "While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, 'Take and eat; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (*Matthew 26:26-28*). These words echo ideas from *Isaiah 53:10-12*, especially the notion of a substitutionary death which brings forgiveness of sin (France, 1994). In this passage, Jesus directly mentions his redemptive blood as the fulfilment of the blood sacrifices described in the books of *Leviticus*, *Isaiah*, and other *Old Testament* passages. Besides the notion of a blood sacrifice, the text emphasizes the substitutionary nature of Jesus's death, and it also speaks of the "new covenant," ratified by Christ's blood. We have already seen these features of the atonement as we approached the texts from *Leviticus*, *Isaiah*, and *Hebrews*. Nevertheless, Jesus adds something important: "I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom" (*Matthew 26:29*). The Matthean text provides us with an *eschatological thrust*, as Jesus brings to discussion the future Messianic banquet. Christ's sacrifice ensures not only the disciples' entry into the kingdom of God – inaugurated eschatology – but also their participation in the kingdom's full consummation. This is confirmation that all promises of the new covenant will be fulfilled. The fulfilment will take place in the eschatological reality envisioned by Jesus when he speaks of drinking the fruit of the vine "new" (*καινὸν*) in His Father's kingdom. Jesus's mention of the new wine anticipates the new creation, in which all things will be new. This "newness" includes glorifying the believers, like Jesus himself was glorified.

The partaking of bread and wine by the disciples and Christ's promise that they will be with Him in His Father's kingdom (*Matthew 26:29*) point to the disciples' unity and participation in Christ's death and resurrection. As such, they will be glorified, joining Jesus at the Messianic banquet with new bodies. The apostle Paul writes about Christian's heavenly citizenship, and he points out that, at His second coming, Jesus Christ will transform human bodies into a glorious state (*Philippians 3:20-21*).

So, as we have argued above, Matthew 26 showcases one of the benefits resulting from the atoning work of Christ, that is still to be actualized, namely, the glorification of our bodies, as disciples of Christ who follow Him in life and death, and our participation with Him in a new creation characterized by joy in God's presence.

How is this related to social work? The world is far from perfect. Consequently, social workers know they cannot help everyone with all their needs, even with a

systemic restoration approach. However, they can provide hope, even amid the most difficult situations people encounter. This hope is not illusory – as the disciples participating in the Lord's Supper (a real foretaste of the messianic banquet), so the hope provided by means of social work practice is real. This reality is emphasized by what is called "the site of hope": "Our framework understands social work relationships as a process towards the site of hope, and it positions the role of social work values and purpose to instil and nurture hope. Social work, as a process of generating hope, is not to invent hope. Instead, attention needs to be given to re-conceptualize what is realistic and attainable hope." (Boddy *et al*., 2018, 7). In other words, the "site of hope" reveals something that is already there (a network of relationships and resources) as a basis for building future realistic hope. In this context, the social worker acts as a facilitator who generates enthusiasm for discovering "latent hope" through various lines of connection and relationships people have. A Christian perspective will also add to this "site of hope" the spiritual dimension and the eschatological doctrine of a new creation. Social work relationships as a process of generating hope are illustrated in Figure x.

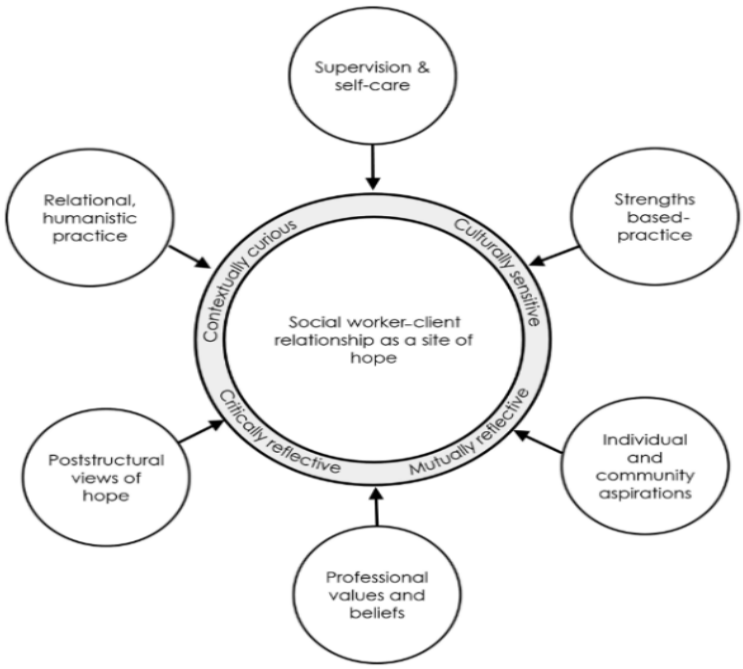

Figure 1. "Social work relationships as a process of generating hope"
(Source: Boddy *et al*., 2018, 7)

Thus, hope is not artificially created; it is discovered within the relationship between the social worker and the client. It implies seeing the client in the cultural

context and considering different cultural and social sensitivities. All influences and relationships are considered important in enabling hope in the beneficiaries' lives.

6. Conclusion

We can summarize our findings as illustrated in Table 1 below.

Table 1. The doctrine of atonement as a paradigm for a Christian approach to social work

Biblical Text	Theological Theme	Christian Social Work Approach
Leviticus 16	Sacrificial atonement	Non-discriminatory sacrificial service
Isaiah 53	Substitutionary suffering	Empathy
Hebrews 9	New covenant fulfilment	Systemic restoration
Matthew 26	Eschatological promise	Realistic hope

The doctrine of atonement serves as a paradigm for a Christian approach and perspective in social work.

There is an ontological and moral gap between sinful people and a holy God. Sin hinders people from approaching God, and it also places them under God's judgment. This is why, in the Old Covenant, God provided a substitutionary atonement for the Israelites through animal sacrifices that were brought into the Most Holy Place of the Tabernacle once a year on the Atonement Day (*Yom Kippur*). This idea of *sacrifice* is essential to social work practice because it highlights human dignity and the need to offer help to everyone, not only to those considered "worthy" of support. The sacrifice is non-discriminatory.

As the biblical revelation progresses, the prophet Isaiah writes about a Person, a Servant of the Lord, who is ready to sacrifice Himself as he bears the iniquities of sinners. This idea of substitutionary death serves as another pillar for social work, namely *empathy*. This value in social work keeps the client at the forefront.

The book of *Hebrews* brings more light, testifying that this Savior is Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who, by his blood, inaugurated a new covenant, making the old one obsolete. Under this new covenant, all sins are forgiven, the sacrifice is once-for-all, the believers have access in the presence of God, they inherit the Kingdom of God, and they have clean consciences. Similarly, social work aims at *systemic and resilient restoration*, meaning we should work to change the roots of social problems by engaging with all societal actors.

The Lord's Supper underlines an eschatological thrust of the atonement: those who partake of the new covenant will be with Jesus in the presence of His Father, having new, glorified bodies. While by Christ's blood, Christians are free from the corruption

and bondage of sin, they are still waiting to be free from the presence of sin, with new and glorified bodies. Similarly, social workers seek to provide people with sustainable and realistic hope, not by creating it artificially but by discovering and nurturing it in the context of a "site of hope". Drawing from the doctrine and theology of atonement, sacrifice, empathy, systemic restoration, and real hope are some of the cornerstones of a Christian approach to social work.

This topic can be expanded by exploring the main areas of the social work ministry, highlighting the relevance of an atonement-rooted Christian approach in each, and outlining specific methods for its implementation.

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Evidence-Based Social Work Theories in Recidivism Prevention: Explanatory Models, Psychosocial Mechanisms, and Foundations of Contemporary Correctional Intervention

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Abstract. *This theoretical paper advances an integrative framework for understanding evidence-based social work theories in the prevention of criminal recidivism, with a particular focus on explanatory models, psychosocial mechanisms, and contemporary correctional intervention foundations. Drawing on desistance theory, identity transformation approaches, the Risk–Need–Responsivity (RNR) model, and evidence-based practice paradigms, the paper synthesizes key theoretical traditions that inform modern correctional social work. The analysis conceptualizes recidivism not as a fixed individual trait, but as a dynamic outcome shaped by interactions between personal histories, cognitive-emotional processes, social relationships, institutional practices, and structural opportunities for reintegration. Desistance theory is examined as a process-oriented framework emphasizing narrative identity change, agency, and social recognition, while the RNR model is analysed as a structured, risk-focused approach grounded in actuarial assessment and targeted intervention. Rather than positioning these models as theoretically incompatible, the paper highlights their complementary contributions to understanding behaviour change and rehabilitation trajectories. Furthermore, the paper situates evidence-based practice as a bridging paradigm that integrates empirical rigor with ethical responsibility in correctional social work. Behavioural change mechanisms, psychosocial adjustment, and reintegration processes are discussed in relation to long-term social outcomes, including reduced reoffending, social inclusion, and community safety. Particular attention is given to the role of social work in mediating between control-oriented correctional systems and rehabilitative, person-centred interventions. This paper constitutes the theoretical foundation of the doctoral research on contemporary correctional social work interventions, providing a coherent conceptual architecture for examining how evidence-based models can be operationalized to support sustainable desistance and social reintegration among justice-involved populations.*

Keywords: *recidivism prevention, correctional social work, desistance theory, identity transformation, Risk–Need–Responsivity model, evidence-based practice, psychosocial mechanisms, rehabilitation and reintegration, behavioural change, criminal justice intervention.*

1. Introduction

Recidivism remains one of the most persistent challenges confronting contemporary criminal justice systems and correctional social work. Despite decades of

reform efforts, high rates of reoffending continue to signal the limits of punitive, deterrence-based approaches and the need for theoretically grounded, empirically validated, and ethically informed intervention models. In response, social work has increasingly positioned itself as a key actor in the development and implementation of evidence-based strategies aimed at reducing recidivism by addressing the psychosocial, relational, and structural determinants of criminal behaviour.

Recent scholarship has emphasized that criminal behaviour and reoffending cannot be understood in isolation from cumulative adversity, trauma exposure, and social marginalization. Trauma-informed perspectives have gained particular relevance, highlighting how unresolved trauma, chronic stress, and maladaptive coping mechanisms contribute to cycles of offending and relapse. Evidence-based reviews demonstrate that psychosocial interventions grounded in trauma-informed principles are associated with improved adjustment and reduced risk behaviours across custodial and community-based settings (Pârvu & Rad, 2025). From an ethical and philosophical standpoint, trauma-informed social work reframes correctional intervention as a process that must prioritize safety, dignity, and non-retraumatization while remaining accountable to public protection (Runcan *et al*., 2025). Within correctional contexts, this orientation aligns with emerging models that integrate rehabilitative goals with justice-based values. Restorative justice–informed social work emphasizes accountability, relational repair, and community reintegration as central mechanisms for reducing reoffending, particularly in probation and post-release supervision (Vlai & Rad, 2025). These approaches challenge purely risk-driven paradigms by foregrounding agency, responsibility, and social belonging as key dimensions of sustainable behavioural change. At the same time, advances in intervention delivery – such as ecological momentary interventions – have expanded the methodological toolkit of social work, enabling more responsive and context-sensitive support for justice-involved individuals navigating high-risk situations in real time (Cadariu & Rad, 2025).

The growing prominence of trauma-informed and evidence-based correctional social work is further reflected in recent bibliometric analyses, which document a marked increase in interdisciplinary research at the intersection of forensic social work, rehabilitation, and psychological intervention (Rad, Runcan & Kiss, 2025). This expanding knowledge base underscores the need for integrative theoretical frameworks capable of reconciling diverse models of behaviour change, from actuarial risk assessment to narrative identity transformation.

Within this landscape, "what works" research has played a decisive role in shaping correctional policy and practice. Syntheses of empirical evidence consistently indicate that interventions aligned with criminogenic needs, responsive to individual characteristics, and delivered with fidelity are more effective in reducing recidivism than generic or punitive programs (Latessa, Johnson & Koetzle, 2020). Social support has

also emerged as a critical protective factor, with multilevel analyses demonstrating that relational resources significantly influence post-release outcomes and desistance trajectories (Orrick *et al*., 2011). Complementary theoretical perspectives, such as inoculation theory, suggest that structured exposure to risk-related cognitions and coping strategies can strengthen resistance to reoffending by enhancing cognitive preparedness and self-regulation (Matusitz & Breen, 2013).

From a developmental and social work perspective, recidivism is closely linked to broader processes of social exclusion, limited access to education and employment, and disrupted life-course transitions. Correctional social work has long emphasized the importance of social development, community integration, and structural opportunity as foundations for crime prevention (Rainford, 2010). Contemporary theoretical syntheses reinforce this view, situating recidivism prevention within a multidimensional framework that includes individual change, relational support, and systemic reform (Preda, 2022). Insights from relapse prevention research further illuminate parallels between substance use relapse and criminal reoffending, highlighting the role of high-risk situations, coping deficits, and maintenance strategies in sustaining behavioural change (Brandon, Vidrine & Litvin, 2007).

Empirical studies across diverse populations provide additional nuance to these theoretical claims. Qualitative research with juvenile offenders suggests that residential and community-based interventions can support desistance when they attend to young people's perspectives, identities, and relational needs (Abrams, 2006). Educational attainment has likewise been identified as a protective factor, with recent analyses confirming its relevance for both crime prevention and long-term social reintegration (Chloupis & Kontompasi, 2025). Restorative justice initiatives have shown promise as alternatives to traditional sanctions, particularly when embedded within supportive social work practice (Mahardhika, 2021).

At the clinical level, correctional social work increasingly incorporates evidence-based psychosocial techniques aimed at enhancing self-regulation, emotional awareness, and coping capacity. Mindfulness-based interventions have been proposed as tools for supporting present-moment awareness and impulse control in justice-involved populations (Turner, 2009), while contemporary trauma theory underscores the necessity of integrating coping and resilience processes into interventions for individuals with complex trauma histories (Goodman, 2017). Longitudinal studies further demonstrate that probation strategies, placement decisions, and intervention intensity significantly shape recidivism outcomes among first-time and high-risk offenders (Ryan, Abrams & Huang, 2014). Finally, relapse prevention models developed within the field of sexual offending and violence prevention provide important conceptual foundations for understanding recidivism as a process rather than a discrete event. These models emphasize the identification of risk pathways, self-monitoring, and

long-term maintenance of change (Laws, 1999; Launay, 2001), offering transferable insights for broader correctional social work practice.

Against this theoretical and empirical backdrop, the present paper aims to articulate an integrative, evidence-based framework for recidivism prevention that brings together desistance theory, the Risk–Need–Responsivity model, trauma-informed practice, and psychosocial mechanisms of change. By synthesizing these perspectives, the paper seeks to clarify the foundations of contemporary correctional social work and to position social work as a central actor in the development of sustainable, ethically grounded interventions for reducing reoffending and promoting long-term social reintegration.

2. Desistance Theory and Identity Transformation

Desistance theory has emerged as one of the most influential explanatory frameworks in contemporary criminology and correctional social work, offering a dynamic and process-oriented understanding of how and why individuals cease offending over time. In contrast to static risk-based models, desistance perspectives conceptualize criminal behaviour and its cessation as embedded within broader life-course trajectories, identity constructions, and social contexts. Central to this body of work is the assumption that desistance is not a singular event, but a gradual, non-linear process shaped by cognitive, emotional, relational, and structural transformations.

A foundational contribution to identity-based desistance theory is the work of Paternoster & Bushway (2009), who introduced the concept of the "feared self" as a motivational driver of change. According to this model, desistance is initiated when individuals experience a growing dissonance between their current offending identity and a feared future self-associated with continued criminal involvement. This cognitive reorientation creates the conditions for intentional behavioural change, linking agency, self-reflection, and future-oriented thinking. Subsequent empirical research has supported this identity-centred perspective, demonstrating that shifts in self-concept significantly predict the timing and durability of desistance (Paternoster *et al*., 2016).

Empirical studies across diverse offender populations further reinforce the centrality of identity transformation. Bachman *et al*. (2016) showed that among long-term drug-involved adult offenders, sustained desistance was strongly associated with the adoption of a non-offender identity, rather than with external controls alone. Similarly, Liu & Bachman (2021) provided quantitative evidence that persistent offending is closely tied to entrenched criminal self-identities, suggesting that without meaningful identity change, behavioural interventions may yield only temporary effects.

The cognitive and narrative dimensions of identity transformation have been elaborated through the theory of cognitive transformation proposed by Giordano, Cernkovich & Rudolph (2002). This framework identifies key stages in the desistance

process, including openness to change, exposure to "hooks for change," the development of a replacement self, and the redefinition of deviant behaviour. Giordano (2016) later refined this model by emphasizing the mechanisms through which cognitive shifts interact with social opportunities, reinforcing the idea that identity change is both internally constructed and socially supported. Narrative identity approaches further illuminate how individuals make sense of past offending and future aspirations. Research on redemption and transformation narratives highlights the role of self-storytelling in repairing stigmatized identities and resisting marginalization (Liem & Richardson, 2014; Stone, 2016). These narratives enable individuals to reinterpret their past actions within a broader moral and developmental framework, thereby supporting agency and self-efficacy. O'Sullivan, Kemp & Bright (2015) similarly emphasize that desistance is facilitated when individuals are able to construct coherent, future-oriented self-stories that align with prosocial roles.

Social identity perspectives extend these insights by situating identity transformation within relational and group contexts. Kay & Monaghan (2019) argue that recovery and desistance processes are best understood through a social identity model, wherein changes in group membership and social belonging play a decisive role. This view aligns with findings that social recognition, acceptance, and the availability of prosocial roles are critical for sustaining identity change over time (Bushway & Paternoster, 2013; Bushway & Uggen, 2021). Desistance is thus not solely a private cognitive shift, but a socially negotiated process requiring validation from others.

Existential and moral dimensions of identity transformation have also been explored, particularly in relation to religion and spirituality. Jang & Johnson (2017) propose that existential identity transformation, grounded in spiritual meaning-making, can facilitate desistance by providing alternative moral frameworks and sources of purpose. These processes resonate with strengths-based and values-oriented approaches in social work, which emphasize meaning, dignity, and self-determination.

Agency occupies a central place in desistance theory, though it is conceptualized as constrained and relational rather than absolute. King (2013) and Healy (2013) both emphasize "transformative agency," highlighting how individuals actively shape their life trajectories while navigating structural limitations. Rocque, Posick & Paternoster (2016) further demonstrate that identity change unfolds over time, with periods of ambivalence, relapse, and recommitment, underscoring the need for long-term, supportive interventions rather than short-term compliance-focused programs.

Critical reviews of desistance theory caution against overly romanticized or individualistic interpretations. Weaver (2019) underscores the importance of integrating identity-based models with structural analyses of inequality, stigma, and institutional barriers. Laub & Sampson's (2001) age-graded theory of informal social control remains

relevant in this regard, emphasizing the stabilizing role of social bonds such as employment, family, and community integration in supporting desistance trajectories.

Recent theoretical developments have further expanded the conceptual landscape. Dent & Ward (2023) propose an enactive view of identity transformation, suggesting that identity emerges through embodied interaction with social environments rather than purely cognitive reflection. Polaschek (2019) similarly integrates psychological perspectives on motivation, self-regulation, and learning into desistance theory, bridging criminology and correctional psychology. These integrative approaches resonate strongly with contemporary correctional social work, which operates at the intersection of individual change and environmental support.

Finally, interdisciplinary syntheses underscore the relevance of desistance theory for specialized offender populations. Mihăilă *et al*. (2025) demonstrate how identity transformation and desistance paradigms can be applied to relapse risk reduction among sexual offenders, highlighting the compatibility of desistance-oriented thinking with structured intervention models when appropriately integrated.

Desistance theory and identity transformation frameworks provide a robust theoretical foundation for understanding recidivism as a process of change rather than a fixed outcome. For correctional social work, these perspectives underscore the importance of interventions that support narrative reconstruction, agency development, and social recognition, while remaining attentive to structural constraints. Within the broader architecture of this paper, desistance theory establishes the psychosocial and identity-based mechanisms that complement risk-focused models, laying the groundwork for an integrative approach to evidence-based recidivism prevention.

3. Risk–Need–Responsivity (RNR) Model

The Risk–Need–Responsivity (RNR) model represents one of the most influential and empirically supported frameworks guiding contemporary correctional intervention and recidivism prevention. Developed within the tradition of evidence-based correctional psychology, the RNR model provides a structured approach to offender assessment and treatment by aligning intervention intensity, targets, and methods with empirically validated predictors of reoffending. Within correctional social work, the RNR model has played a central role in shifting practice away from unstructured, intuition-based interventions toward systematic, data-informed decision-making.

At its core, the RNR model is grounded in three fundamental principles. The risk principle holds that the intensity of intervention should be matched to an individual's assessed risk of reoffending, with higher-risk individuals receiving more intensive services and lower-risk individuals being spared unnecessary intervention. The need principle emphasizes that effective interventions must target criminogenic needs –

dynamic risk factors such as antisocial cognition, substance misuse, poor self-regulation, and weak prosocial ties – that are empirically linked to recidivism. The responsivity principle underscores the importance of tailoring interventions to individuals' learning styles, cognitive capacities, motivation, and personal characteristics to maximize engagement and effectiveness (Andrews *et al*., 2011).

The theoretical foundations of the RNR model have been extensively elaborated and critically examined. Ward, Melser & Yates (2007) offered a conceptual reconstruction of the model, clarifying its psychological underpinnings and addressing common misinterpretations that reduce RNR to a purely actuarial or technocratic tool. Their analysis highlighted that RNR is not inherently incompatible with rehabilitative or humanistic goals, but rather requires careful implementation to avoid overly reductionist applications. Polaschek (2012) similarly emphasized that the effectiveness of RNR-informed interventions depends less on the model itself and more on the quality, fidelity, and ethical sensitivity of its application in practice.

Debates surrounding the RNR model have often focused on whether it requires a paradigm shift toward more strengths-based or well-being-oriented frameworks. Looman & Abracen (2013) questioned the necessity of replacing RNR, arguing instead for its refinement and integration with complementary models. Andrews *et al*. (2011) explicitly addressed this debate by examining whether incorporating elements of the Good Lives Model enhances crime prevention outcomes. Their findings suggest that while strengths-based components may enrich intervention content, they do not negate the central importance of risk and need targeting for reducing recidivism. The applicability of the RNR model across diverse populations has also been a subject of extensive empirical inquiry. Skeem, Steadman & Manchak (2015) demonstrated that RNR principles remain relevant for justice-involved individuals with mental illness, provided that responsivity considerations – such as cognitive impairments, psychiatric symptoms, and treatment readiness – are adequately addressed. Their work challenges assumptions that RNR is unsuitable for complex clinical populations and instead underscores the necessity of nuanced, interdisciplinary implementation. Brogan *et al*. (2015) extended this analysis to juvenile justice contexts, showing that RNR-informed approaches can be effective with young offenders when developmental responsiveness and family contexts are incorporated.

From a historical and developmental perspective, Wormith & Zidenberg (2018) trace the evolution of the RNR model from its origins in social learning theory to its current status as a cornerstone of evidence-based correctional practice. They argue that the model's enduring relevance lies in its adaptability and its capacity to incorporate emerging empirical findings. This adaptability is further reflected in calls for a "next generation" of the RNR model, which emphasize system-level implementation,

interagency coordination, and continuous feedback mechanisms (Taxman, Caudy & Pattavina, 2013).

Recent evidence syntheses reinforce the empirical robustness of the RNR framework. Fazel *et al*. (2024), in an umbrella review and commentary, conclude that adherence to RNR principles is consistently associated with reductions in recidivism across offender groups and correctional settings. However, they also caution that poor implementation fidelity, excessive reliance on static risk factors, and neglect of responsivity considerations can undermine effectiveness. These findings echo earlier critiques that emphasize the ethical and practical risks of applying RNR in a mechanistic or punitive manner.

Within correctional social work, the RNR model occupies a complex position. On one hand, it provides a powerful evidence-based structure for assessment, intervention planning, and outcome evaluation. On the other hand, it has been critiqued for insufficiently addressing identity transformation, agency, and social reintegration – dimensions that are central to desistance-oriented frameworks. Contemporary scholarship increasingly suggests that these approaches need not be viewed as mutually exclusive. Rather, the RNR model can be understood as addressing the "how" of risk reduction – through structured targeting of criminogenic needs – while desistance theory elucidates the "why" and "for whom" of long-term behavioural change.

In this sense, the RNR model serves as a critical pillar within an integrative framework for recidivism prevention. When applied with ethical sensitivity, trauma-informed awareness, and responsiveness to individual and social contexts, RNR-informed interventions can complement identity-based and strengths-oriented approaches. For correctional social work, this integration is essential to balancing public safety imperatives with rehabilitative goals, ensuring that evidence-based practice remains both effective and human-centred.

4. Evidence-Based Practice in Correctional Social Work

Evidence-based practice (EBP) has become a defining paradigm in correctional social work, reflecting a broader shift toward accountability, effectiveness, and empirical rigor in criminal justice interventions. At its core, EBP seeks to align correctional programs with scientific evidence regarding "what works" in reducing recidivism, while simultaneously confronting the organizational, ethical, and professional challenges inherent in translating research into practice.

Early formulations of evidence-based corrections emphasized the identification and replication of programs shown to reduce reoffending. MacKenzie (2000) articulated one of the foundational syntheses of this movement, arguing that correctional effectiveness depends on systematically distinguishing interventions that produce measurable reductions in crime from those that do not. Latessa (2003) further advanced

this agenda by highlighting the "challenge of change" faced by correctional systems, noting that the adoption of evidence-based practices requires not only empirical knowledge but also institutional willingness to reform entrenched routines and beliefs.

As evidence-based approaches gained prominence, scholars increasingly turned their attention to the complexities of implementation. Rhine, Mawhorr & Parks (2006) famously described implementation as the "bane" of effective correctional programs, underscoring that even well-designed interventions can fail when delivered inconsistently or without organizational support. This insight has been echoed in subsequent analyses emphasizing that EBP is not a static set of techniques, but a dynamic process shaped by leadership, staff training, organizational culture, and interagency coordination (Taxman & Sachwald, 2012; Burrell & Rhine, 2013).

Within correctional social work, evidence-based practice has also generated critical debate regarding the nature of evidence itself. Trinder (2000) cautioned against overly narrow interpretations of EBP that privilege randomized controlled trials while marginalizing practitioner expertise and client perspectives. Similarly, McNeill *et al.* (2012) argue for moving beyond a "confined view" of what works, advocating a more expansive understanding of evidence that incorporates qualitative insights, relational processes, and contextual factors central to community corrections. Psychological perspectives have further complicated the EBP discourse. Gannon & Ward (2014) critically examined the marginalization of psychological theory within some evidence-based correctional programs, warning that excessive proceduralism can strip interventions of their theoretical coherence and therapeutic depth. Their analysis underscores the importance of integrating empirically supported methods with robust psychological and social work theories of change, rather than treating evidence-based practice as a purely technical exercise.

From a developmental and social work standpoint, Rainford (2010) situates evidence-based correctional practice within a broader framework of social development, emphasizing that sustainable crime reduction requires attention to social inclusion, opportunity structures, and community engagement. This perspective aligns with research demonstrating that evidence-based interventions are most effective when embedded within supportive social environments rather than implemented in isolation (Golder *et al*., 2005). The evolution of assessment and evaluation tools has played a critical role in operationalizing evidence-based practice. Duriez *et al*. (2018) document how correctional program assessment has become increasingly sophisticated, incorporating standardized metrics, fidelity monitoring, and continuous quality improvement processes. These developments reflect an effort to ensure that interventions not only adhere to evidence-based principles but also adapt to emerging empirical findings.

At the same time, scholars have highlighted the ethical and legal dimensions of evidence-based corrections. Klingele (2015) identifies both the promises and perils of EBP, cautioning that an uncritical reliance on actuarial tools and outcome metrics may obscure issues of proportionality, fairness, and individual rights. This critique is particularly salient for correctional social work, which operates at the intersection of care and control and must reconcile evidence-based decision-making with professional values of dignity, justice, and respect for persons. Recent contributions emphasize the importance of translational science in bridging the gap between research and practice. Prujean, Ward & Vandevelde (2022) argue that translating scientific knowledge into clinical correctional settings requires ongoing dialogue between researchers and practitioners, as well as adaptability to local constraints. Holsinger (2023) similarly calls for a "next phase" of evidence-based correctional practice that prioritizes implementation science, practitioner engagement, and integration with rehabilitative and desistance-oriented frameworks.

The literature suggests that evidence-based practice in correctional social work is best understood as an integrative and reflexive process rather than a fixed methodology. While empirical evidence provides indispensable guidance for intervention design and evaluation, effective practice also depends on ethical judgment, theoretical coherence, and sensitivity to individual and social contexts. In this sense, evidence-based correctional social work functions not merely as a mechanism for risk reduction, but as a framework for aligning scientific knowledge with humane, developmentally informed, and socially responsive interventions aimed at reducing recidivism and supporting long-term reintegration.

5. Behavioural Change, Reintegration, and Long-Term Social Outcomes

Behavioural change and social reintegration represent the ultimate objectives of correctional social work and the most meaningful indicators of successful recidivism prevention. While short-term reductions in reoffending are important, contemporary scholarship increasingly emphasizes long-term social outcomes, including stable community integration, access to employment and housing, relational reconstruction, health and well-being, and sustained desistance. From this perspective, behavioural change is not reducible to compliance with supervision conditions, but reflects a broader process of social re-embedding and identity consolidation.

Early empirical research on reintegration underscored the multifactorial nature of post-release success. Graffam *et al*. (2004) demonstrated that offenders and professionals consistently identify employment, housing stability, social support, and community acceptance as critical determinants of successful reintegration. These findings highlight that behavioural change is contingent upon both individual motivation

and the availability of structural opportunities. Reintegration therefore emerges as a reciprocal process in which personal change must be met by social inclusion.

Longitudinal studies further substantiate the link between reintegration services and long-term outcomes. Ryan, Davis & Yang (2001) found that adjudicated delinquents who received structured reintegration services exhibited a significantly lower likelihood of adult imprisonment, suggesting that early and sustained support can alter life-course trajectories. Similarly, Visher *et al*. (2017) demonstrated that re-entry services addressing employment, substance use, and family relationships exert measurable long-term effects on recidivism, though outcomes vary depending on service type and intensity. These findings reinforce the argument that reintegration is not a singular intervention, but a coordinated process requiring continuity of care across institutional and community contexts.

Theoretical and practice-oriented contributions from correctional psychology and social work converge on the importance of individualized, relationally grounded support. Wormith *et al*. (2007) describe the contemporary landscape of offender rehabilitation as increasingly attentive to responsivity, motivation, and environmental context, moving beyond one-size-fits-all programming. Day, Ward & Shirley (2011), in their analysis of reintegration services for long-term and high-risk offenders, emphasize that sustained behavioural change requires structured support that balances supervision with therapeutic engagement and gradual assumption of responsibility.

Probation and community supervision play a central role in shaping reintegration trajectories. Healy (2012) conceptualizes probation supervision as a relational practice encapsulated by the principle to "advise, assist and befriend," suggesting that supportive, respectful relationships can foster agency and desistance. This relational orientation contrasts with the non-treatment paradigm critiqued by Raynor & Vanstone (1994), who argue that supervision focused solely on control undermines rehabilitative potential. Historical analyses further illustrate how shifts from social work–oriented probation to sanction-driven models have altered the balance between support and surveillance, with implications for reintegration outcomes (Harrikari & Westerholm, 2015). Restorative justice has gained increasing attention as a mechanism for facilitating reintegration and social repair. Lin, Chen & Wu (2023) provide evidence that restorative justice practices contribute to improved social reintegration and reduced recidivism by promoting accountability, dialogue, and community engagement. These processes align closely with desistance theory, as they offer opportunities for identity reconstruction and social recognition, thereby reinforcing behavioural change beyond formal supervision.

The emotional and motivational dimensions of reintegration are equally significant. Flesaker & Larsen (2012) highlight the centrality of hope in reintegration work, emphasizing that practitioners' capacity to convey belief in change is itself a

therapeutic mechanism. Their qualitative findings suggest that reintegration counsellors function not only as service providers, but as carriers of moral and emotional support, particularly for marginalized populations such as women on parole and probation. Recent scholarship has also expanded the analysis of long-term outcomes beyond recidivism to include health and well-being. Phelps *et al*. (2022) demonstrate that probation can generate both benefits and harms, with health consequences shaped by supervision intensity, stress exposure, and access to support. This broader lens underscores that successful reintegration must be evaluated not only in terms of criminal justice metrics, but also in relation to social and health outcomes that reflect overall quality of life.

Community-based reintegration strategies further illustrate the importance of social ecology. Zhang, Roberts & Callanan (2006) found that parolees participating in community-based programs were less likely to return to prison, particularly when interventions addressed practical needs and fostered social connections. These findings resonate with earlier and contemporary research emphasizing that reintegration succeeds when communities are equipped to receive returning individuals and when institutional barriers to participation are minimized.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This paper has proposed an integrative theoretical perspective on recidivism prevention by bringing together key evidence-based frameworks in correctional social work: desistance theory, the Risk–Need–Responsivity (RNR) model, evidence-based practice paradigms, and research on behavioural change and social reintegration. Rather than treating these approaches as conceptually opposed, the analysis has shown that they address complementary dimensions of the desistance process and can be productively integrated within contemporary probation and correctional systems.

Desistance theory contributes a process-oriented understanding of behavioural change, emphasizing identity transformation, agency, and narrative reconstruction as central psychosocial mechanisms underlying sustained reductions in offending. The RNR model complements this perspective by providing a structured and empirically grounded framework for assessing risk, targeting criminogenic needs, and tailoring interventions to individual responsivity factors. When combined, these models allow correctional social work to address both the meaning of change for the individual and the mechanisms through which change can be supported and sustained.

Evidence-based practice functions as the overarching paradigm that connects theory to intervention. As demonstrated in the literature, effective correctional social work depends not only on the selection of empirically supported methods, but also on their ethical, contextual, and relational implementation. Behavioural change and long-term reintegration outcomes further highlight that recidivism prevention must be

evaluated beyond short-term compliance, encompassing social inclusion, relational stability, and access to structural opportunities.

Within this framework, the present paper serves as the theoretical foundation of the PhD thesis *Evidence-based psychosocial interventions for recidivism prevention in the probation system*. It provides a coherent conceptual basis for examining how psychosocial interventions implemented in probation settings can foster desistance, support identity transformation, and facilitate sustainable social reintegration. By integrating desistance-oriented and risk-focused models within an evidence-based and ethically grounded approach, the thesis is positioned to contribute both to scholarly debate and to the development of effective probation practice.

Acknowledgement

In the preparation of this paper, the authors have used the ChatGPT artificial intelligence model (version 5.2) exclusively for the purpose of refining and finishing the expression of the text. The scientific content, argumentative structure and interpretations presented belong entirely to the authors. All suggestions generated by the AI have been critically analysed, verified and validated by the authors, who assume full responsibility for the accuracy, originality and integrity of the works.

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Prevention Measures in Social Work for Adults with Relationship Problems

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Abstract. *This paper explores the preventive dimension of social work with adults experiencing relationship difficulties. It highlights the need to move from reactive interventions to proactive approaches that strengthen emotional competence, communication, and relational stability. Prevention is analysed at three levels- primary, secondary, and tertiary- showing how early and coordinated actions can reduce the social and emotional costs of relationship crises. The study emphasizes that prevention in social work is not only a method but also an ethical commitment to protecting human relationships, promoting family cohesion, and fostering social well-being.*

Keywords: *prevention, social work, couple relationships, resilience, family cohesion.*

1. Introduction

In the context of social, economic, and cultural transformations of recent decades, adult couple relationships are increasingly exposed to multiple pressures, reflected in the growth of family instability, divorce rates, role conflicts, and social isolation.

Social work, both as a professional practice and an academic discipline, is in a position to address these challenges not only by intervening after crises have already occurred, but also by developing approaches that anticipate difficulties and support the maintenance of relational balance.

From this perspective, prevention takes on an increasingly important role within contemporary social service systems, being more and more frequently positioned as a key direction in European policies aimed at strengthening social cohesion (European Commission, 2022; UNICEF, 2022).

In the Romanian context, although prevention is formally regulated through the Social Assistance Law no. 292/2011, its implementation in practice remains uneven, especially in relation to services designed for adults experiencing tension or instability within couple relationships.

Most services are still organized around a reactive paradigm, intervening only after the emergence of manifest crises such as divorce, domestic violence, or family disorganization (Zamfir & Zamfir, 2021; FDSC, 2023).

In this context, the aim of the present paper is to highlight the essential role of prevention within social work addressed to adults experiencing difficulties in couple

relationships, through a theoretical and applied analysis of the concept, existing types of prevention, and measures implemented at the international level, in order to identify possible directions for developing a coherent and efficient preventive system in the Romanian context.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Prevention is generally regarded as a paramount intervention in the field of social science. It is related to the risk management and consequently it may strengthen altogether the individual and the community resilience.

The scientific literature typically considers prevention as a sequence of organized and intentional actions which aim at anticipating, limiting, or minimizing social, psychological, or medical risks, that in certain circumstances, may trigger vulnerability, pathology, or social exclusion (Caplan, 1964; Payne, 2021).

In social work practice, prevention goes beyond being a simple addition to intervention. It represents a structured approach that focuses on limiting the occurrence or progression of social problems by identifying risks at an early stage, offering support to vulnerable individuals, and mobilizing available community resources (Caplan, 1964; Payne, 2021).

As Payne (*op. cit.*, 112) states, "prevention is, by its nature, a form of active protection, involving the anticipation of problems and the mobilization of individual and community resources to maintain social balance."

Thus, prevention extends beyond reactive responses and proposes an anticipatory framework of intervention, oriented toward balance, education, responsibility, and the strengthening of protective factors at multiple levels – individual (resilience, self-control), relational (communication, emotional support), and community (support networks, inclusive policies) (Coleman, 1988; Dominelli, 2009; Marici *et al*., 2023).

When considered in the context of couple relationships, prevention takes on a dual meaning, both at a personal and a social level. The couple can be understood as a key subsystem within the wider social structure, bringing together emotional, economic, parental, and community-related dimensions.

Situations of relational crisis, such as difficulties in communication, imbalances in roles, or experiences of social isolation, do not remain confined to the couple itself.

They often extend beyond it, influencing children, family support networks, and, more broadly, the stability of the community (Halford, 2016; Rădulescu, 2020).

This perspective is supported by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model of human development, which positions the couple relationship as a key element within the interaction between the individual and the social environment.

At the same time, social capital theory (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000) highlights that stable and functional relationships contribute directly to social cohesion, civic participation, and collective well-being, while relational breakdown weakens trust and social solidarity.

Prevention is inherently dynamic and multidimensional, which has led to the development of various classification models in literature, depending on the timing of intervention, the level of risk, or the general or specific nature of the actions involved.

The most widely recognized typology, adopted in European social policies, is the tripartite classification proposed by Caplan (1964), which distinguishes between:

- *Primary prevention*, focused on the general population and aimed at preventing the emergence of problems through the promotion of relational health, psycho-social education, and the development of life skills;
- *Secondary prevention*, applied to individuals or groups at risk, with the objective of early identification of dysfunctions and timely intervention before they escalate;
- *Tertiary prevention*, targeting individuals who have already experienced major crises (such as divorce, violence, or abandonment), focusing on reducing consequences, rehabilitation, and social reintegration.

In addition to this framework, Anglo-Saxon literature has introduced a complementary typology, aligned with public health and social education policies, distinguishing between:

- *Universal prevention*, addressed to the entire population regardless of risk level;
- *Selective prevention*, targeting vulnerable social or demographic groups (e.g. single-parent families, couples undergoing socio-economic transitions);
- *Indicated prevention*, designed for individuals who already show early symptoms or warning signs of relational difficulties (Gordon, 1983; European Commission, 2022).

Both classifications are complementary and can be applied in an integrated manner within social protection systems. They allow for a rational structuring of preventive interventions, tailored to the actual needs of beneficiaries and to the stage at which relational difficulties occur.

In the context of social work with adults experiencing couple relationship problems, this differentiation becomes essential for selecting appropriate strategies, ranging from community education to specialized counselling or post-crisis interventions.

3. Types of Prevention in Social Work with Adults Experiencing Couple Relationship Difficulties

Prevention can be structured in several forms, depending on the timing of the intervention and the level of associated risk. Within the context of social work, particularly when working with adults in strained relationships, this framework becomes essential for identifying and applying appropriate interventions at the right moment.

The following section presents the three classical types of prevention (Caplan, 1964), adapted specifically to couple relationships.

3.1. Primary Prevention – Strengthening Relational Health

Primary prevention targets the general adult population and aims to reduce the likelihood of relational dysfunctions. It operates before problems emerge and addresses not only couples who show no visible signs of conflict, but also those who may be exposed to future risks because of social, economic, or cultural pressures.

Primary preventive interventions include:

- relational education (communication skills training, conflict management, emotional negotiation);
- awareness campaigns regarding couple roles, gender equality, and positive parenting;
- promotion of emotional well-being within the community through workshops and seminars;
- creation of spaces for dialogue (e.g. community centres, online support platforms).

Primary prevention may trigger significant improvements in the quality of social relationships. In addition, it may diminish the conflict frequency and provide abilities to face every day stressful situations (Halford, 2016; Fincham & Beach, 2010). However, in Romanian institutions, preventive interventions are somehow scarce and limited.

Most of the existing initiatives are provided by non-governmental organizations, religious institutions, or private services, in the absence of a clearly defined and coordinated national strategy (FDSC, 2023).

3.2. Secondary Prevention – Early Intervention in Relationships at Risk

Secondary prevention is applied to groups at risk or in the early stages of relational vulnerability. It involves the early identification of dysfunctions, such as poor communication, emotional withdrawal, chronic stress, or recurrent conflicts, and rapid intervention in order to prevent escalation into crisis.

Examples of secondary interventions include:

- couple counselling in community centres or specialized practices;
- psycho-social support groups for partners undergoing difficult transitions (e.g. job loss, relocation, migration);
- psycho-social screening within other services (medical, educational), followed by referral to specialists.

According to Rădulescu (2020), intervention during the stage of latent vulnerability is crucial, as it "*allows the restoration of relational balance with a much lower psychological and institutional cost than in the stages of open crisis*."

An interesting model can be found in the Nordic countries, where secondary prevention is integrated into the public health and social service system.

In Romania, the lack of standardized screening and the absence of inter-institutional referral protocols result in many adults accessing social services only in advanced stages of conflict, when the chances of restoration are reduced (Zamfir & Zamfir, 2021).

3.3. Tertiary Prevention – Reducing the Consequences of a Relational Crisis

Tertiary prevention intervenes after the occurrence of a major crisis (divorce, separation, domestic violence) and aims to limit long-term negative effects, both for the partners and for the children or the affected community.

The objectives of this type of prevention include:

- protecting victims and facilitating access to support services (psychological, legal, economic);
- preventing recurrence of violence and retraumatization;
- rehabilitation of partners and support for rebuilding personal identity after the crisis;
- promoting functional co-parenting, even in cases of separation.

In their study on post-divorce intervention, Fincham & Beach (2010) show that the absence of coherent tertiary support leads to long-term trauma, parental alienation, and deterioration of parenting performance, with transgenerational effects.

In Romania, tertiary prevention is partially covered by domestic violence prevention programs; however, these are often activated only after the occurrence of physical aggression, without a reintegration or relational reconstruction approach (Ministry of Justice, 2021).

In addition, post-divorce services are poorly developed, and family mediation is optional and rarely used.

The types of prevention applied in the field of couple relationships cover a continuum of intervention, ranging from the promotion of relational health (primary), to early detection of dysfunctions (secondary), and to post-crisis rehabilitation (tertiary).

In a well-organized social work system, all these levels should be interconnected, with clear protocols for identification, referral, and intervention.

In Romania, the implementation of these levels of prevention remains fragmented and insufficiently supported, especially in the case of primary and secondary prevention, which have the greatest potential for social and emotional effectiveness (FDSC, 2023; European Commission, 2022).

4. Preventive Measures in Social Work for Adults with Couple Relationship Problems

Effective prevention in the field of couple relationships involves not only the conceptualization of intervention, but also the implementation of concrete measures, adapted to each level of risk and to the manifestation of dysfunctions.

International models of good practice provide clear examples of actions tailored to primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention, supported by coherent public policies, intersectoral collaboration, and adequate funding.

4.1. Primary Prevention

The general objective of these programs is to prevent the emergence of relational problems by promoting healthy relationships and developing emotional and social competencies. International models highlight the effectiveness of early relational education and systematic preventive interventions.

In the United States, the program PREP- Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program, developed by Stanley, Markman, and Blumberg, is one of the most scientifically validated relational education programs.

It provides training for couples in areas such as effective communication, conflict management, empathy, and problem-solving. The program is widely implemented in community centres, religious organizations, and public institutions, and has also been adapted for premarital education. Longitudinal studies have shown that it reduces divorce rates by up to 30% within the first five years after implementation (Stanley *et al*., 2001).

In Australia, the national network Relationships Australia offers a wide range of educational and counselling services for individuals, couples, and families. The programs include both online and face-to-face workshops for young people, married couples, future parents, and adolescents, focusing on healthy relationships, communication, parenting, and conflict prevention.

These services are offered either free of charge or with government support, and national evaluations point to a noticeable improvement in relationship satisfaction, alongside a reduction in the escalation of conflicts (Halford, 2016).

In Norway, prevention in the relational sphere starts early, within the school system. The Ministry of Education has introduced mandatory programs focused on emotional and social development, aimed at encouraging empathy, cooperation, and the ability to manage interpersonal relationships.

This educational model is considered a form of early relational prevention, contributing to the development of emotional competencies in future adults and to the prevention of dysfunctional relational behaviours.

Overall, these models demonstrate that emotional-relational education and preventive interventions can strengthen the health of couple relationships and reduce the social costs associated with family conflicts. They can serve as valuable sources of inspiration for the development of similar programs in Romania, oriented toward prevention, emotional development, and community support.

4.2. Secondary Prevention

The main objective of these programs is the early identification of relationships experiencing difficulties and the implementation of preventive intervention before the onset of an irreversible crisis.

The models implemented in the European space demonstrate the effectiveness of an interdisciplinary and accessible approach.

In Denmark, municipal authorities provide free counselling services for couples, without the need for a medical referral. These centres offer relational risk assessment, short counselling sessions, and parental coaching, being designed to support couples during periods of tension or transition.

Based on analyses carried out by European networks focused on good practice, these services are valued for their role in limiting the escalation of conflicts and in strengthening relational resilience, and are frequently highlighted as positive examples in the annual reports of the European Social Network (ESN, 2021).

Although precise statistical data on their impact may vary across local contexts, case studies consistently point to a general trend of improved relationship satisfaction among those who access these services (European Social Network, 2021).

Data published by the European Social Services Network (2021) show that around 68% of participants reported a noticeable improvement in their relationship within the first three months of engaging in the program.

In Germany, the program “EPL – Ein partnerschaftliches Lernprogramm” (“A learning program for partnership”), developed by the Institute for Research and Therapy of the Family in Munich (IFT) in collaboration with the Catholic University of Eichstätt-

Ingolstadt, promotes psychosocial and psychoeducational support for couples facing relational or parental stress.

The program benefits from public co-financing and the involvement of non-governmental organizations, offering individual counselling, group sessions, and thematic workshops focused on communication and relational resilience.

The Swedish model integrates relational intervention into the network of primary services. General practitioners, school psychologists, and educators can identify early signs of couple dysfunction and refer individuals to specialized social services.

This type of inter-institutional system, built on clearly defined collaboration protocols, helps reduce gaps in intervention and makes it possible to act promptly in the early stages of relational difficulties.

Such practices underline the importance of early intervention, accessible services, and effective collaboration between professionals in preventing the deterioration of couple relationships. At the same time, they can serve as valuable reference points for developing a similar system in Romania, with a stronger focus on prevention and on reinforcing family and community support.

4.3. Tertiary Prevention

The objective of these interventions is to reduce the negative effects of conjugal crises such as divorce, domestic violence, and abandonment, as well as to support the processes of rehabilitation and social reintegration of the individuals involved.

One of the well-known initiatives in the Netherlands is the KIES / KIDS (Kids in Divorce Situations) program, a program based on interactive groups for children who are going through their parents' divorce, as well as providing indirect support for parents, with the aim of improving communication and reducing trauma (Dutch Expertise Centre Children and Divorce).

At the same time, in the Netherlands there are also public services that support the development of the parental plan after divorce (co-parenting), through the Nederlands Jeugdinstituut (NJI), which offers guidelines and professional support regarding forms of parenting after separation.

In Canada, the government supports family violence prevention initiatives through the "Family Violence Prevention Program (FVPP)", which funds shelters, community projects, educational prevention activities, and local interventions.

At the international level, the KIES / KIDS model is a recognized one and has documentation available online, being recommended by NJI for interventions in the context of divorce.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The theoretical and applied examination of prevention in social work addressing adults with couple relationship difficulties points to a clear direction in the international literature: prevention is no longer seen as optional, but as a core component of contemporary social intervention.

Literature indicates that interventions based on treating family negative outcomes once they appeared are not cost effective and limited as efficiency. In contrast, preventive interventions, no matter what type, community-based, psycho-social or educational are known to generate better effects at all levels, individual, family or society (Marici et al., 2025).

Prevention in social work represents the first choice when addressing human problems. It can be considered the main approach rather than an adjacent action which reflects an ethical and professional commitment to support human well-being and development of prosocial values and practices. In order to achieve this target, it is necessary to involve institutions and wider community to understand the advantages of long-term relational support and development, than focusing on a crisis-response model (Vîșcu & Marici, 2024).

Thus, the adult couple is not only a beneficiary of the social system, but also an active participant in community cohesion, capable, with adequate support, of contributing to the construction of a society based on trust, balance, and relational dignity.

Acknowledgement

The editing of some parts of this paper involved the use of ChatGPT (GPT-5.3, Instant), in April 2026. The software was used for linguistic editing and proofreading of the text.

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The Courage to Decide: A Reflective Perspective on Ethical Challenges in Contemporary Social Work in Romania

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Abstract. *This paper explores how ethical dilemmas, rather than merely being obstacles, constitute the core of social work's professional identity. A radical change of perspective is proposed: abandoning the "ethics of fear" – that excessive concern with avoiding mistakes in the face of bureaucracy – in favour of a practice that values moral courage and one's own thinking. Given that the usual theoretical models come up against the rigidity of the Romanian system, the paper puts forward four pragmatic solutions: a new way of justifying decisions through the ethical justification note, a triage method for moments when resources are scarce, spaces for dialogue between institutions (CREI), and the protection offered by an ethical lawyer. The central idea is that the social worker needs a system that supports him, not just controls him, thus transforming decision-making stress into a real opportunity for professional growth.*

Keywords: *integrity in social work, ethical dilemmas, ethical triage of resources, decision-making autonomy, inter-systemic collaboration.*

1. Introduction. The Profession of Social Work between the Value Imperative and the Reality of the Practice

When we talk about social assistance, we are not only referring to the application of procedures, but also to the way a professional balances the needs of the person before them with the rules of the system. The values we read about in social welfare treaties – respect, justice, confidentiality – are not just theoretical concepts (Banks, 2012); they are put to the test every day, in every socially evaluated case. Often, codes of ethics provide general guidance, but they do not specify precisely what to do when the duty to the institution conflicts with the client's best interests.

Over time, the focus has shifted from analysing the beneficiary to evaluating our own decisions. Ethical dilemmas are increasingly seen as a natural part of the job, even when they cause considerable stress or the moral exhaustion discussed in recent studies (Chatzifotiou & Papouli, 2022). However, we believe it is precisely these difficult moments that force us to stop working "on autopilot". In the following pages, we examine how to turn these bottlenecks into opportunities for growth. We will analyse practical models, such as the Ethical Triage Protocol, to help us make sound decisions when time pressure or resource constraints seem to overwhelm us.

2. Theoretical Framework: Ethical Decision Models and Paradigms

The literature provides various ethical decision-making (MLDE) frameworks designed to guide professionals in navigating value conflicts (Dolgoff, Harrington & Loewenberg, 2012).

2.1. The Deontological Model (Duty/Principle-Based)

The deontological model has its roots in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant and emphasises duty and respect for absolute moral principles, regardless of the consequences. For a social worker using this approach, an action is intrinsically right or wrong, and the decision is based on the obligation to respect the profession's fundamental principles (e.g. autonomy, self-determination, confidentiality).

Applied example: *Self-Determination vs Protection*

Let us consider the case of an elderly client, fully cognitively competent, who consistently refuses home care services, even though she lives in precarious conditions that, predictably, can affect her health and safety (such as the risk of falling, poor hygiene, etc.). The social worker faces, in this case, a conflict between:

- *Duty to Respect Autonomy (Self-Determination)*: This is often regarded as a paramount principle in social ethics, upholding the client's right to make their own choices and take risks, provided this does not affect the rights of others. A deontological social worker would argue that a competent client has the right to make a decision, even if it is unpleasant or involves risks.

- *Duty to ensure non-malice (Protection)*: The obligation to prevent harm and to act in the best interests of the client (paternalism) to protect him/her from foreseeable harm (isolation, illness, accidents).

Under a *duty-based approach*, if it is clearly well-founded that the person possesses a full understanding, *the responsibility to uphold autonomy prevails*, and the social worker refrains from forced intervention, even if such restraint is demanding. If *autonomy is regarded as the overriding principle* (as it often is in liberal ethics), then the social worker should respect the choice, even if disagreeable, presuming that a capable adult has the freedom to engage in risk-taking.

2.2. The Teleological/Utilitarian Model (Based on Consequences)

This model and, of course, utilitarianism, concentrate on the purpose of actions. The moral decision enhances the net good (beneficence) or keeps to a minimum the net evil (nonmaleficence) for all parties involved. Social workers assess the consequences of each alternative. This model is based on the principle of "maximum good" – opting for the action that yields the greatest overall benefit.

Applied Example: *Privacy vs Third-Party Protection*

A client discloses to the social worker, during a one-on-one session, that they plan to injure their partner (an identifiable third party) physically. The social worker carries out *a calculation of the consequences*:

- *Consequence of maintaining confidentiality*: Client trust would be maintained (minor benefit), but serious injury or death of the third party would be allowed (high cost).

- *Consequence of breach of confidentiality*: Although breaching would strain the therapeutic alliance and involve a limited infringement of privacy, it would avert harm, sometimes substantial, and would ensure compliance with the legally recognised duty to warn, as developed through case law (Tunkel, 1999).

Under *the Principle of Least Harm*, serious bodily harm (foreseen harm) outweighs breach of confidentiality (minor damage), leading to the decision to act to protect the third party. The social worker violates confidentiality (deontology) to preserve life (utilitarianism) by notifying the victim or the authorities.

2.3. The ETHIC (Examine, Think, Hypothesise, Identify, Consult) Model developed by the Congress (2000) offers a lens of analysis (rationality) combining deontological and teleological elements, ensuring a complete contextual and professional analysis.

Stages of the ETHIC Model:

- *E – Examine Values (Examine)*: The social worker identifies and examines relevant values that may be in conflict: *personal* (religious, cultural beliefs), *societal* (norms), *institutional* (policies), *client and professional* (Code of Ethics).

Example: A Christian social worker (personal value) works in a family planning program (organisational value) with a client who wants a legal abortion (client value).

- *T – Treat Standards (Think)*: Consult the specific standards of the professional Code of Ethics (e.g. NASW), relevant laws (international, national) and previous court decisions.

Example: The privacy standard and its limits (protection of the customer or others) and the legislation on mandatory reporting are checked.

- *H – Hypothesise*: teleological reasoning is applied, hypothetical scenarios are formulated, and the *possible consequences (pros and cons)* for each alternative decision are listed.

- *I – Identify the Vulnerable*: It assesses who will benefit and who will be harmed, with a special focus on *the profession's commitment to the most vulnerable, oppressed and exploited.*

Example 1: In a resource dilemma (macro-), the allocation of funds to a group with critical needs (e.g. chronically homeless) is prioritised over a group with less urgent needs.

Example 2: Prioritising the child's well-being over the right to privacy of the parent accused of neglect.

- *C – Consult*: Formal or informal *consultation* is requested from supervisors, experienced colleagues (including from other disciplines, e.g. psychologists) or ethics committees. Consultation is a crucial step for obtaining multiple perspectives and ensuring *professional responsibility.*

2.4. Models of Virtue Ethics and Relational Ethics (Ethical Competence)

Desirable behaviour goes beyond simply applying the steps of a model. It incorporates aspects of moral character (virtue ethics) and relational quality (care/relational ethics).

- ***Virtue Ethics***: This perspective places primary emphasis on the moral character of the practitioner rather than on individual acts, treating character as central to lawful and ethical conduct (Banks, 2012). Proper practice is understood to depend on the possession of professional virtues such as competence, honesty, compassion, integrity, and moral courage, which underpin decision-making regarding professional duties. The ideal social worker is characterised not only by knowledge of appropriate actions but also by the cultivation of the personal qualities required to act responsibly within a legal framework.

Example: A social worker at a private centre for children with disabilities discovers that management has drastically reduced food and heating to increase profits, thereby endangering the children's health. He/she is aware that reporting the problem to DGASPC could result in dismissal and social stigmatisation in the local community, where the centre's director has considerable political influence.

Dilemma: Silent Compliance (Job Safety) vs Reporting Abuse (Child Protection) (Roth-Szamoskozi, 1999).

Virtuous action: the social worker chooses to report the situation, but not only because "this is what it is said in the law" (deontology), but because his/her professional identity is incompatible with complicity in suffering.

Theoretical justification: the decision of the social worker is a manifestation of moral courage and integrity. The ethics of virtue emphasises that a competent practitioner is not the one who only knows the rules, but the one who has the strength of character to apply them when the personal cost is high. He chooses to be a protector of the vulnerable, even at the expense of his own comfort.

- ***Relational/Care Ethics***: Emphasises the unique relationship with the beneficiary, promoting *attention, responsibility, competence, and receptivity* in the

relationship with the beneficiary (seen as a whole person), counterbalancing the neutrality and excessive impartiality of strictly principled approaches (Juhila *et al*., 2020).

Example: In the self-determination case involving older people, the social worker would not assess capacity solely in legal terms. He/she would consider the client's social isolation as an underlying factor and propose non-coercive interventions, such as participation in a support group guided by professional compassion. The management of ethical dilemmas requires the integration of principles, relational and character-based approaches. These together constitute ethical competence in practice.

3. Ethical Dilemmas as Mechanisms of Learning and Development

Finding yourself in an ethical dilemma is not only a difficult challenge to navigate, but also a key moment that demands professional maturity. These conflicts of values take us beyond the "autopilot" of standard rules and require deeper reflection. When we view the dilemma as an act of praxis (that is, an action that passes through the filter of thought), abstract values on paper become fundamental skills. Each correctly solved borderline situation becomes a learning laboratory that cements our professional character in a few essential ways.

3.1. Training Critical Thinking and Getting out of the Routine

Dilemmas force us to step out of the comfort zone of simple solutions and exercise practical judgement (phronesis), a concept philosophers have long discussed. We are no longer just looking for "right" or "wrong"; we begin to see the nuances: the pressure of the law, the limits of the institution, and the man's life before us. A clear example: consider the situation where you have to choose between maintaining confidentiality and protecting someone from risk (for example, in the case of an HIV diagnosis not disclosed to the partner). There is no ready-made answer here. You have to analyse what the "lesser evil" means and where one person's right ends to protect another's life. This exercise in moral balancing develops our ability to navigate uncertain situations in which no solution seems perfect. This mechanism involves the following steps:

3.1.1. Synergy between Deontological Frameworks and Teleological Approaches

Resolving dilemmas requires mediation between divergent ethical systems: the ethics of duty (deontology) and the ethics of finality (teleology). This stage requires the specialist to rank moral principles using validated decision-making models such as the value hierarchy proposed by Reamer (2018). The objective is to determine the "minimum harm" or the "optimal benefit" in a specific context, a process that eliminates simplistic approaches and favours stratified critical thinking.

Practical Application (Integrity vs Confidentiality): In the case of an imminent risk of self-harm, the practitioner must balance the imperative to maintain professional secrecy against the ethical duty to preserve life. The justification for intervening to protect physical integrity, at the expense of confidentiality, confirms the adoption of professional behaviour grounded in moral responsibility rather than in the mechanical observance of norms.

3.1.2. Expanding the Contextual Horizon

Confronting the dilemmas requires an extensive analysis of the context (ETHIC, stage E). This includes examining not only clinical and legal aspects, but also societal (stigma and discrimination), organisational (agency policies and resources), and personal (social worker values and biases) influences.

Example (Resource Dilemma): In situations of limited resource allocation (macro practice), the dilemma compels consideration of distributive justice – a principle not directly related to individual interaction but which shapes ethical practice at the systemic level.

3.1.3. Developing Reflexivity and Awareness of Personal Values

An essential component of overcoming dilemmas is the **development of critical reflexivity**, i.e. the social worker's ability to examine themselves in relation to the situation and to become aware of their value system.

Awareness of the Conflict of Values

Dilemmas highlight the risk of imposing personal or cultural values on the client (ethics of paternalism).

Example (Paternalism): If the social worker's personal (religious) values oppose abortion, an ethical dilemma arises when a client requests support for a legal procedure. The MLDE process (stage E) requires the social worker to acknowledge this conflict and suspend personal judgment to honour the client's self-determination (a core professional value).

Transition to Virtuous Behaviour (Virtue Ethics)

Solving dilemmas helps to strengthen moral character and defines what it means to be an ethical professional, not merely doing what is right. Dilemmas often require moral courage to act on ethical principles despite fear, hierarchical pressure, or lack of popularity (e.g. reporting a colleague's unethical behaviour). Every act of courage reinforces this desirable virtue. At the same time, social workers learn to manage their personal problems (e.g. burnout or substance abuse) so that they do not interfere with professional judgement or endanger clients, thereby demonstrating integrity.

Example: An eloquent case is presented by the social worker with conservative views who must facilitate access to a voluntary termination of pregnancy for a client.

This dissonance underscores the danger of imposing personal values on the intervention path. Through critical reflexivity, the specialist separates his convictions from the professional act, adopting a posture of value neutrality. In this way, priority is given to the client's right to informed choice, thereby strengthening integrity and a work ethic at the systemic level.

3.2. Strengthening Collegial Behaviour and Distributed Responsibility

The ETHIC model consistently reminds us that difficult decisions should not rest on a single person's shoulders. We transform dilemmas from personal problems into a team effort, which helps us feel much more confident in our decisions. This collaboration strengthens our professional profile in two ways:

3.2.1. Consultation as a Standard of Practice

In social work, consultation with a supervisor or the rest of your peers should be the rule, not the exception. It's a vital "safety net," especially in complex situations – such as those involving privacy in the age of social media and technology. When you seek the advice of an ethics committee, you are not demonstrating ignorance but a much greater sense of responsibility towards the client and the profession.

Benefit of consultation: Not only are multiple perspectives obtained, but prudent and reasonable conduct (the standard of care) is demonstrated, thereby protecting the social worker from accusations of negligence or malpractice. Formal or informal consultation provides multiple perspectives and shares the burden of decision-making, thereby protecting the social worker from moral and professional exhaustion.

3.2.2. Strengthening Functional Relationships

Dilemmas arising from colleagues' unethical conduct or professional incompetence place professional loyalty under strain. While reporting such problems is challenging, the use of formal procedures is a legal and ethical obligation and helps uphold professional standards. Conversely, a failure to consult improper conduct erodes ethical practice (EHIC Model, Stage T).

Collective discussions of complex cases (e.g. in ethics or case management committees) contribute to the refinement and internalisation of standards of practice at the institutional and professional levels.

When you bring together the perspectives of the psychologist, the lawyer and the doctor, the social worker's decision gains greater weight and becomes more robust (Klos *et al*., 2022). The multidisciplinary team serves as a filter, helping us see more clearly the advantages and disadvantages of each option. It is increasingly evident that ethics is not merely a personal concern of the assistant; it depends heavily on the organisation. Without supervision and specialised training, it is difficult to expect

someone to make sound decisions under pressure. In this sense, dilemmas are not merely obstacles but moments that compel us to grow and become more stable professionals.

The problem arises when we try to apply these models "by the book", imported from the West, in the Romanian context (Klos *et al*., 2022). In our reality, strict rules often become suffocating bureaucracy that forgets the individual. Moreover, when resources are scarce, the pursuit of the "greatest good" can, unfortunately, become an excuse to exclude the most vulnerable. That is why we need a critical examination of how we conduct ethics in a system where shortages and administrative uncertainty are the norm.

4. Critical Analysis of Traditional Decision-Making Models with Applicability in Romania

The literature provides robust theoretical frameworks for addressing dilemmas, but specific barriers constrain their applicability to the social services ecosystem in Romania.

4.1. The Limits of Deontology and the Risk of Bureaucratisation

Even with high-performance theoretical models at our disposal, the reality on the ground completely alters their meaning. The first significant problem is that deontology – that is, compliance with rules and duties – becomes a suffocating bureaucracy (Lipsky, 2010).

The Romanian social worker, caught between mountains of files and the constant fear of making mistakes under scrutiny, ultimately practises what we might call an "ethics of administrative survival". Instead of asking, "How can I really help this person?", the question that dominates the practitioner's mind becomes, "How do I make sure I'm covered in paperwork if a check-up comes?"

It is a sad mutation: we are moving from genuine care for people to cold management of institutional risks. Human interaction is replaced by a "tyranny of the well-done file". If a beneficiary's need does not fit precisely into the boxes on the sheet, it risks remaining unresolved. Thus, we have a system that works flawlessly on paper but, in practice, is devoid of moral content and empathy.

Example: A social worker in a SPAS works with a single mother at risk of losing her home and seeking emergency help from the local authority. Although he knows the eviction will have a devastating impact on the children, the social worker focuses exclusively on verifying eligibility for emergency aid under the strict criteria set by the legal provisions. If the mother does not fit "to the comma", the case is rejected without further consideration, and the social worker considers that he has done his legal duty, ignoring the ethical duty to seek alternative solutions or to advocate for a justified exception. The decision becomes a cold, uncompassionate administrative act.

4.2. Utilitarianism and the Trap of Limited Resources

The teleological model, which aims to maximise the good for the many, becomes problematic in underfunded systems. In the absence of clear ethical criteria for resource allocation, utilitarianism can be instrumentalised to justify the exclusion of marginalised groups (e.g. homeless people and drug users) in favour of groups considered "more deserving" or more likely to recover. Thus, economic efficiency risks undermining the principle of social justice.

Example: A DGASPC decides to reduce home care services for immobilised older adults and redirect the budget to children's day centres. The argument is "utilitarian": we invest in the future (children) and help more beneficiaries with the same money. However, this decision condemns older people to isolation and rapid deterioration, sacrificing the rights of a vulnerable minority in the name of a purely economic calculation of the "common good".

4.3. The ETHIC Model and Institutional Hierarchies

The ETHIC model (Congress, 2000) proposes that supervisors be consulted at the final stage of the decision-making process. However, in organisations with a rigid hierarchical culture, as in some public institutions in Romania, supervision is often equated with hierarchical administrative control. Consulting a supervisor can be problematic if the organisational culture is rigid and discourages critical thinking, or if the supervisor tolerates unethical practices (e.g. "we don't report this, so we don't have problems with the management"). The social worker may feel intimidated about raising ethical issues, fearing repercussions (labelling as "problematic" or isolation).

Example: A social worker identifies inadequate and substandard food provision in a residential care home for older people, despite sufficient budgetary allocations. Although the ETHIC model would require consultation with management, this option is compromised where financial governance lacks transparency. Therefore, the practitioner faces a legal dilemma: remain silent and become complicit in neglect, or raise concerns at the risk of sanction in the absence of a secure external reporting mechanism.

5. Methodological Proposals for Desirable Professional Behaviour

To stimulate desirable behaviour – characterised by reflexivity, courage, and beneficiary-centredness – we propose implementing mechanisms tailored to local realities.

5.1. "Reflective Compliance" (MCR) Model

In the current landscape of social work in Romania, professional practice is often dominated by a "defensive ethics" paradigm. It is characterised by the absolute priority given to the practitioner's institutional protection and security in the face of the risk of administrative sanction, to the detriment of the helping relationship.

In response to the tension between the letter and the spirit of the law, we propose the Reflective Conformity Model (RCM). This represents an epistemological and pragmatic solution that does not deny the importance of the normative framework (deontology) but instead proposes a resignification of it. The central premise of the model is that compliance with the law should not be a passive act of blind submission but an active process of ethical interpretation of legal norms. At the heart of the RCM is the concept of phronesis, the practical wisdom articulated by ancient philosophers, which enables professionals to discern the appropriate course even when the law is unclear or incomplete. This model aims to change how social workers view the rules. We are no longer talking about a simple compliance check (the classic question: "Am I allowed to do this according to the procedure?"), But about a creative and ethical application of the rules. The question turns into a much deeper one: "How can I use this regulation as an instrument that defends, above all, the dignity and well-being of the person in front of me?"

5.1.1. Instrumentation of the Model: Ethical Justification Note

To avoid subjectivism and lend rigour to this interpretative process, the RCM introduces an innovative administrative tool: the Ethical Justification Note (NJE). This transforms often-invisible ethical reasoning into tangible evidence of professional competence, presented as a document attached to the case file. Through the NJE, the social worker documents how they have balanced the spirit of the law with the values of the profession, explains the tension between the letter of the law and the factual situation, and argues for a decision that prioritises values (e.g. life over bureaucratic compliance).

5.1.2. The Decision-Making Process

The decision-making process within the RCM is structured in four distinct stages, meant to take the practitioner out of the area of automatisms:

- **Normative analysis and identification of tension:** Mapping the legal framework (e.g. Law 292/2011) and identifying the point at which the application *ad litteram* conflicts with a fundamental ethical principle or with the reality of the case.

- **Reflective deliberation:** The critical stage in which the impact of options is comparatively assessed. It analyses the collateral harms of rigid compliance versus the benefits of a reflexive interpretation that serves the law's ultimate purpose – the welfare of the beneficiary.
- **Formalisation through the NJE:** Drafting the ethical argumentation and mentioning the peer consultations or supervision, transforming the administrative act into an exercise of assumption of responsibility.
- **Institutional validation and learning:** Integrating informed decisions into the ethical oversight circuit to prevent moral distress and improve institutional practices.

5.1.3. Applicability in the Context of Systemic Vulnerability

The relevance of the RCM becomes clear in scenarios typical of the Romanian system. For example, in a dilemma between confidentiality and protection (such as a minor disclosing abuse but refusing to inform parents), the mechanical application of the reporting law could lead to a loss of trust or an escalation of danger. Through the RCM, the social worker can adopt an "ethical data minimisation" strategy, recording in the NJE that protecting the child's safety is the top priority, thereby justifying a temporary deviation from the standard family information procedure.

Similarly, in distributive justice situations where rigid eligibility criteria may exclude beneficiaries with acute needs (e.g. an elderly person with income marginally above the limit but with enormous medical expenses), the MCR allows the construction of a case for a "justified exception". The NJE will document the actual net disposable income, arguing that refusing the service would generate substantially higher subsequent social costs (hospitalisation, institutionalisation), thereby respecting the principles of efficiency and humanity.

In conclusion, implementing the Reflective Compliance Model requires a paradigm shift within regulatory bodies such as CNASR (2022) by recognising the Ethical Justification Note in quality and audit standards. This would enable the transition from the status of bureaucratic executor to that of an autonomous profession capable of advancing social justice even in the interstices of an imperfect system.

5.2. Inter-institutional Ethical Reflection Chambers (CREI)

Many ethical failures in our system do not arise from a lack of goodwill but from the way bureaucratic walls separate institutions (Alhusban & Adams, 2015). The police, the hospital, and the DGASPC often operate according to rules that appear unrelated. The result? A painful conflict between the need to punish the offender (justice) and the need to protect the victim (care).

We propose, as a concrete solution, establishing Ethical Reflection Chambers (CREI) at the county level. We do not see them as new control bodies, but as spaces for dialogue – "safe harbours" where specialists can sit at the same table without fear of judgement. The goal is simple: to negotiate values before they become serious errors.

How does ethical negotiation work in practice? Let's take the extremely sensitive example of hearing a child victim of abuse. The police want precise details for the case, while the social worker wants to prevent the child's suffering. In a CREI-type structure, these camps no longer compete for official addresses; instead, they collaborate to develop a "Single Hearing Protocol". The child speaks only once, in a friendly environment, and the investigators obtain the necessary evidence. It proves that, through dialogue, we can respect the law without destroying the person we should be caring for.

5.2.1. CREI Implementation in Romania: Strategy

To operationalise the CREI within the Romanian administrative context, a pragmatic approach is needed that draws on existing legal mechanisms for inter-institutional cooperation (Alhusban & Adams, 2015).

Implement Strategy

- **Legal Framework:** The establishment of the CREI can be achieved through **County Collaboration Protocols**, signed under the aegis of the Prefect's Institution or the County Councils, which have the role of coordinating the decentralised services. The Law on Social Assistance (292/2011) encourages an integrated approach and the conclusion of inter-institutional collaboration protocols.
- **Piloting:** It is recommended to initiate pilot projects in 3-4 counties with complex cases, to test the working methodology.
- **Validation by professional bodies:** The opinions and protocols issued by the CREI must be disseminated and validated by the CNASR, the College of Physicians and the College of Psychologists, to give them professional authority.

The establishment **of the Inter-institutional Ethical Reflection Chambers** is a necessary step for the maturation of the social assistance system in Romania. They transform ethical dilemmas from sources of inter-institutional conflict and paralysis in decision-making into opportunities to fine-tune interventions. Through CREI, moral responsibility is no longer borne solely by the social worker. Still, it is distributed and collectively assumed by the entire chain of intervention, guaranteeing a unitary, coherent practice truly centred on the dignity of the beneficiary.

5.3. Establishing the Position of "Ethical Lawyer" within the CNASR

This consists in changing the perspective from punitive control to advisory support and protection of professional integrity

5.3.1. Theoretical Foundation and Institutional Necessity

Within the profession's current regulatory architecture (Law 466/2004), the existing ethical structures have a predominantly reactive and punitive mandate, intervening ex post to sanction deviations. This orientation creates a climate of "deontological anxiety", in which professionals avoid openly discussing dilemmas for fear that their uncertainty will be interpreted as incompetence. To counterbalance this culture of control, we propose establishing the position of Ethical Lawyer (Professional Ombudsman) within the CNASR's territorial structures.

The concept marks the shift from an ethic of compliance (adhering to rules under threat of sanction) to an ethic of integrity. The Ethics Lawyer does not replace the legal adviser and has no administrative authority; his role is strictly confidential, providing preventive advice and deontological validation. It serves as a guarantor of professional autonomy, protecting the social worker against institutional pressures that contravene the code of ethics.

5.3.2. Operating Tools: Advisory Ethics Opinion

The most crucial working tool in this proposal is the Advisory Ethics Opinion. We are discussing an official document that confirms to the social worker that his decision – such as refusing to sign a falsified report or to yield to political pressure – is the right one from a professional standpoint. This opinion becomes a real shield: when the institution exerts pressure, the practitioner has the ethical authority of an independent body behind him, thereby validating his integrity.

Moreover, the Ethical Lawyer is the one who stands by whistleblowers. We know how difficult it is to report abuse in a care home or a nursing home, for fear of losing your job. In this context, the Ethical Lawyer assumes responsibility for guidance: he helps accurately document the facts and ensures the anonymity of the person who reports the issues before the inspections. It is a necessary transition from fear of reprisals to the courage to clean up the system from within, with the certainty of real protection.

5.3.3. Operationalisation in Romania: Practice Scenarios

Implementing the Ethical Advocate would equip social workers with the tools to resist institutional pressures that compromise service quality.

Scenario A: Loyalties conflict and hierarchical pressure

Context: A social worker from an SPAS is pressured by the mayor to provide emergency aid to people who do not meet eligibility criteria but are electorally

"important". Refusal is met with threats of annual negative evaluations or a disciplinary transfer.

Intervention of the ethical lawyer: The social worker requests a consultation. The Ethics Lawyer analyses the case and issues an Ethical Advisory Opinion confirming that granting the benefits would violate the principles of social justice and legality. This document can be used by the social worker as a "professional shield" before the hierarchical superior, demonstrating that the refusal is not an act of insubordination but a professional obligation certified by the professional body.

Scenario B: Whistleblowing protection

Context: A social worker at a private residential centre for children observes that management drastically reduces food portions and fails to provide the minimum required staffing on the night shift, endangering the safety of the beneficiaries. They are afraid to report to the DGASPC/AJPIS for fear of dismissal and professional stigmatisation ("troublemaker").

Ethical Lawyer's Intervention: The professional contacts the ethical lawyer. He guides the professional in documenting deviations in line with probation standards and advises on the legal procedure for issuing a warning in the public interest. Moreover, the ethical lawyer can mediate relationships with the control institutions, ensuring the social worker's initial anonymity until the official investigation is initiated, thereby validating the practitioner's moral courage.

5.3.4. Implementation Strategy at National Level

To put this structure into practice in Romania, the following strategic steps are necessary:

- Amendment of the CNASR statute: introduction of the position of Ethics Lawyer (or Ethics Advisor) in the organisational chart of the territorial branches or, at least, at the regional level, by decision of the National General Assembly.
- Training of the body of experts: selection and training of senior social workers with recognised moral probity and advanced knowledge of ethics and legislation, to occupy these positions. They mustn't hold management positions in public social assistance institutions in their area of competence (to avoid conflict of interest).
- Privacy protocol: developing strict procedures to ensure that the call to the Ethics Lawyer will not be disclosed to the employer without the express consent of the social worker.
- Information campaign: educating social workers about the fact that they have the right to ethical advice and that the use of this mechanism is a sign of professionalism, not weakness.

The establishment of the ethical lawyer marks the transition from a culture of individual survival to one of professional solidarity. In the Romanian context, where the protection of employees against institutional abuse is often fragile, this mechanism provides the social worker with a vital resource for putting the profession's values into practice: the assurance that they are not alone when they choose to do what is right.

5.4. From "First Come" to Social Equity: The Ethical Triage Protocol

In Romania, the moral suffering of the social worker most often arises when he is forced to manage "nothing". We refer to periods when there are no funds, shelter space, or sufficient colleagues to cover caseloads. Because we lack clear, official criteria for deciding who receives priority aid, we end up applying the "first-come, first-served" rule or, worse, succumbing to the pressures of the moment. On paper, the method appears fair, but in practice, it creates significant injustices. Basically, those who know how to fight bureaucracy are helped, while the quietest and most helpless people – those who need it most – remain at the bottom of the list, simply because they can't make their voices heard in the system.

To remedy this systemic vulnerability, we propose implementing **the Ethical Triage Protocol**. Inspired by emergency medical practice but adapted to its social specificity, this tool operationalises the principle of distributive justice (Klos et al., 2022). It is based on the hierarchy of human goods proposed by the philosopher Gewirth (1978). The Protocol posits that, in crises, the right to 'basic goods' (those necessary for survival and fundamental functioning) takes absolute precedence over the right to 'additive goods' (those that improve quality of life but are not vital). Thus, ethical triage replaces arithmetic equality – the equal distribution of the little available – with social equity, prioritising cases with the highest degree of vulnerability.

5.4.1. Evaluation Methodology and Decision Matrix

The protocol does not function as a simple checklist but rather as a complex decision-making matrix that integrates three fundamental evaluation dimensions. First, the assessment of vital and functional risk is conducted by analysing the imminence of the danger to the beneficiary's integrity in the absence of intervention. A distinction is thus made between a critical level (risk of death, imminent abuse, total homelessness), a severe level (rapid deterioration of health, severe neglect) and a moderate level (chronic social needs, but without immediate life-threatening). Secondly, the principle of subsidiarity is applied in assessing **alternative resources**. This involves analysing the capacity of informal networks (family, community) to compensate for the absence of public services temporarily, and differentiating between socially isolated beneficiaries (high vulnerability score) and those with an active support network (low vulnerability score). Thirdly, the decision is filtered by **assessing the intervention's**

impact and applying a limited utilitarian logic: priority is given to cases in which social assistance can prevent an irreversible escalation of the situation, serving as tertiary prevention.

5.4.2. Implementation in the Romanian Context: From Theory to Procedure

The operationalisation of this protocol within the General Directorates of Social Assistance and Child Protection (DGASPC) and the Public Social Assistance Services (SPAS) requires standardised procedures to protect practitioners from accusations of subjectivism.

Step 1: Formalising the criteria in the Internal Regulations

Institutions must adopt the Ethical Triage Protocol by administrative decision, clearly establishing that "Critical Need" is the paramount criterion for accessing services, taking precedence over the chronological criterion (registration number). This aligns the practice with standard 6.04(a) of the NASW Code, which requires ensuring equal access to resources to meet basic human needs (Gross, 2024).

Step 2: Using the Scoring Grid (Practical Example)

Let us consider allocating 2 places in a public residential centre for the elderly, given 10 applications.

- **Application of triage**: The social worker does not only analyse the files in the order of submission. He applies the Scoring Grid:
  - *Case A:* Immobilised older adult, living alone in a house without heating, risk of hypothermia (critical risk level).
  - *Case B:* Older adult with incipient dementia, living with son who works, but is neglected during the day (moderate level of risk).
- **Ethical Decision**: Although Case B applied a month in advance, Case A received the seat. The decision is justified by documenting that Case A poses an immediate life risk and has no alternative resources, whereas Case B has limited resources.

Step 3: Transparency and communication of the decision

The protocol requires transparent communication with beneficiaries who are deferred or refused for ethical reasons (not solely because of a lack of places). It is explained that the system prioritises the survival of the most vulnerable of the vulnerable. This honesty reflects respect and professional integrity.

5.4.3. Advantages of Implementing the Ethical Triage Protocol

- **Protection of the professional**: In case of adverse incidents with beneficiaries on the waiting list (e.g. deterioration of health), the social worker is protected from accusations of malpractice or negligence, being

able to demonstrate that the allocation of resources was made based on an objective risk assessment procedure, according to professional standards.

- **Systemic efficiency**: Allocating resources to high-risk cases prevents much higher social costs (e.g. emergency hospitalisations, complex institutionalisations), also responding to a utilitarian logic of maximising the public good.
- **Strengthening social justice:** The Protocol ensures that access to services is determined not by the beneficiary's ability to navigate bureaucracy or external influences, but strictly by fundamental human need, honouring the profession's central mission.

In conclusion, the "Ethical Triage" Protocol does something essential: it takes resource allocation out of the shadows and uncertainty that cause us so much anxiety, and it transforms a painful choice into a clear act of responsibility. It is no longer a decision made at random or under pressure, but a transparent process. The social worker no longer bears the burden of these difficult choices alone, with a method at his disposal that prioritises justice and real needs, even when resources are scarce.

Ethical dilemmas are not anomalies of practice but defining moments for professional identity. The desirable behaviour of the social worker does not lie in avoiding these tensions but in managing them through reflexivity and structured tools. Adapting methods for resolving ethical dilemmas to the Romanian reality requires moving from the mechanical application of the law to the assumption of professional responsibility. The above proposals – Reflective Conformity, Inter-Institutional Reflection Rooms, Ethical Advocate and Ethical Triage – aim to create an ecosystem in which the social worker is protected and encouraged to act in the beneficiary's best interests, transforming the dilemma from a source of anxiety into an opportunity to assert professionalism. Institutions and the professional body must facilitate the transition from a culture of blame to one of lifelong learning, recognising that ethical competence is the foundation of quality in social work.

6. Implementation Measures and Conclusions

For these solutions not to remain at the stage of theoretical desire, the structured intervention of the Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity (MMSS), the National College of Social Workers (CNASR), and local authorities is necessary. The concrete measures that can be taken are aimed at:

- Updating the Quality Standards and methodological norms - The State must revise the minimum quality standards for social services (e.g. Order 29/2019) to include the reflective dimension of ethics.

- **Measure:** Introducing the obligation for the case file to contain an **"Ethical Justification"** section for major decisions (separation of the

child, refusal of services). This would legitimise "Reflective Compliance" as a standard of practice, allowing social auditors to assess not only the presence of documents, but also the reasoning behind the decision.

- Regulation and funding of independent external oversight – Although the law provides for oversight, it is often internal and hierarchical, which inhibits discussion of dilemmas related to institutional abuses.

- **Measure:** Allocating dedicated funds for hiring **independent external supervisors** certified by CNASR, who are not administratively subordinated to DGASPC or SPAS directors. This would create the necessary framework for the "Ethics Lawyer" to function and facilitate the reporting of irregularities without fear of reprisals.

- Formalising the triage protocol in crises - In the context of chronic underfunding, the state must take responsibility for the criteria for streamlining services, taking the burden off the shoulders of the individual social worker.

- **Measure:** Develop a **National Intervention Prioritisation Guide**, which would establish clear ethical triage criteria (based on vulnerability and vital risk). Such a law would protect social workers from malpractice or discrimination accusations when they are forced to refuse services because of resource constraints, shifting responsibility to the systemic level.

- Establishment of Inter-institutional Cooperation Frameworks (CREI) - Collaboration between institutions cannot be left to the discretion of personal relations between employees.

- **Measure:** Signing inter-ministerial protocols (Labour, Health, Interior, Education) mandating the creation of Ethical Reflection Chambers at the county level. These structures should have an advisory role in complex cases (e.g. domestic violence, human trafficking) to harmonise interpretations of laws (e.g. GDPR vs victim protection).

- Reform of the Continuing Education Curricula - CNASR and training providers must move from theoretical courses to the training of applied ethical skills.

- **Measure:** Introduce conditionality for the annual recertification of social workers to go through **"Ethical Training"** modules based on case studies and simulations (role-play), not just on memorising the legislation. The state can support this by funding ongoing training programs for public-sector social workers.

Conclusions and Implications – Towards a culture of ethical competence

The analysis undertaken in this paper confirms that ethics is not merely a chapter in the code of ethics but the backbone of social workers' work. In an increasingly

unpredictable world, dilemmas are no longer exceptions to be feared, but moments that truly define us. We have tried to illustrate that these pressure points are not "system errors", but the very occasions through which we move from the simple application of rules to real practical wisdom.

The solutions we have proposed, such as the Ethical Reflection Rooms and the Triage Protocol, are designed to help us overcome the "ethics of fear" that currently blocks us. Being a good professional means not only avoiding sanctions but also having the courage to make difficult decisions in the person's best interests. But this courage needs support. We cannot let the social worker fight alone; we need a change in mentality at the Ministry and College levels, so that we are no longer controlled by the files but supported in our reasoning. We need Ethical Justification Notes and supervision that teaches rather than punishes. After all, the social worker is the one who maintains the balance between the individual's needs and society's rules. Without this internal ethical compass, our profession would become merely a cold procedure, losing its capacity to change lives.

Disclaimer

This paper reflects deep personal concerns about the future of social assistance in an uncertain context. During the research, I questioned the prevailing tendency to prioritise the case over the human subject. This reality led me to develop mechanisms to protect the social worker's integrity. The chosen title, "The Courage to Decide", is not merely a metaphor but a call to acknowledge the untold difficulties of this profession, where every ethical decision is an act of courage in the face of the system.

Acknowledgement

In preparing this paper, the authors have used the Gemini artificial intelligence exclusively to translate, refine and finalise the text in English. The scientific content, argumentative structure and interpretations presented are entirely the authors' own. All suggestions generated by the AI have been critically analysed, verified and validated by the authors, who assume full responsibility for the accuracy, originality and integrity of the work.

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CHAPTER 2. COMMUNITY, MIGRATION & SOCIAL CAPITAL

Resilience-Oriented Social Work Theories in Custodial Contexts: Psychosocial Frameworks for Intervention with Vulnerable Migrant Populations

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Abstract. *This theoretical paper advances an integrative framework for resilience-oriented social work in custodial contexts, focusing on psychosocial intervention models for vulnerable migrant populations held in public custody and immigration detention settings. Drawing on trauma-informed care, stress-adaptation theories, acculturative stress models, and individual and collective resilience frameworks, the paper conceptualizes custody not merely as a site of control, but as a critical psychosocial environment in which adaptation, recovery, and resilience can be actively supported. The analysis situates migrant vulnerability within intersecting structural conditions, including forced migration, legal precarity, cultural dislocation, and cumulative trauma exposure. By synthesizing ecological, developmental, and rights-based perspectives, the paper highlights how resilience emerges through multilevel processes involving individual coping resources, relational networks, institutional practices, and community-level supports. Particular attention is given to the ethical and human rights dimensions of custodial social work, emphasizing the necessity of dignity-preserving, non-oppressive, and culturally responsive interventions. The paper further integrates acculturative stress and forced migration models with contemporary resilience theory, demonstrating how psychosocial interventions can facilitate adaptive meaning-making, emotional regulation, and social reconnection even under restrictive custodial conditions. By bridging clinical, community, and macro-level social work approaches, the paper contributes a theoretically coherent foundation for intervention design and evaluation in custodial settings.*

Keywords: *resilience-oriented social work, custodial social work, trauma-informed interventions, forced migration, acculturative stress, migrant detention, psychosocial adaptation, human rights-based practice, vulnerability and resilience, institutional care.*

1. Introduction

Forced migration, immigration detention, and public custody represent some of the most complex and ethically challenging contexts for contemporary social work practice. Individuals held in custody as a result of migration processes are often exposed

to cumulative adversities, including pre-migration trauma, perilous migration journeys, post-migration uncertainty, and institutional confinement. Within these settings, social work is required to operate at the intersection of trauma, vulnerability, legal constraint, and human rights, while simultaneously identifying pathways toward adaptation and resilience.

Recent social work scholarship has increasingly emphasized the need to bridge trauma-informed approaches with resilience-oriented intervention frameworks in custodial contexts. Evidence-based reviews highlight that detention and custody environments function as psychosocial stressors in their own right, often exacerbating pre-existing trauma while limiting access to protective resources (Pârvu & Rad, 2025). Trauma-informed social work has therefore emerged not only as a clinical orientation but as an ethical and epistemological framework, grounded in respect for dignity, safety, and non-retraumatization (Runcan *et al*., 2025). This orientation is particularly relevant in forensic and custodial social work, where institutional logics of control may conflict with therapeutic and human-rights-based imperatives (Van Wormer *et al*., 2008; Vlai & Rad, 2025).

Custodial social work with migrant populations must also be understood within broader ecological and systemic frameworks. Ecological perspectives emphasize that trauma and adaptation are shaped by interactions between individuals, families, institutions, and sociopolitical environments (Gitterman & Germain, 2008; Williams, 2010). In migration-related custody, these interactions are often characterized by power asymmetries, legal precarity, and cultural dislocation, requiring social workers to navigate complex relational and structural dynamics. Ecological momentary interventions, for example, have been proposed as innovative approaches for enhancing well-being in highly constrained environments by targeting real-time psychosocial processes (Cadariu & Rad, 2025).

Resilience theory provides a complementary lens for understanding adaptation under conditions of adversity. Rather than framing detained migrants solely as traumatized subjects, resilience-oriented approaches conceptualize individuals and families as active agents capable of meaning-making, coping, and reorganization despite structural constraints. Walsh's family resilience framework underscores the importance of belief systems, organizational patterns, and communication processes in facilitating adaptation (Walsh, 2002, 2016). At the community level, resilience is further shaped by access to social and cultural capital, even within contexts of deprivation (Ungar, 2011). These perspectives challenge deficit-based narratives and support strengths-based intervention models in custodial settings.

Human rights-based social work constitutes another foundational pillar for practice with migrants in custody. Human rights approaches emphasize that access to psychosocial support, protection from harm, and respect for dignity are not discretionary

services but fundamental entitlements (Berthold, 2014). This orientation has been increasingly integrated into both micro-level clinical practice and macro-level advocacy, including social work education and field training with migrant populations (Evans, Crea & Soto, 2021; Kallinikaki, 2019). In custody contexts, where migrants may experience criminalization, surveillance, and restricted autonomy, human rights frameworks provide critical ethical guidance for intervention and policy critique.

The complexity of custodial social work is further intensified by intersecting forms of vulnerability. Migrants in custody may be affected by family separation, undocumented status, trafficking experiences, or exposure to violence across multiple life stages (Zimmerman, Hossain & Watts, 2011; Zayas *et al*., 2017). Intersectionality-informed social work highlights how these overlapping identities and structural positions shape both risk and resilience, calling for anti-oppressive and culturally responsive practice (Nayak & Robbins, 2018; Anis & Turtiainen, 2021). Research on emotions and professional experiences of social workers further indicates that working with highly vulnerable populations generates significant ethical and emotional demands, underscoring the need for reflective and supportive practice frameworks (Ruiz-Fernández *et al*., 2021).

Custodial contexts also intersect with broader debates in critical and forensic social work. Critical social work perspectives emphasize the necessity of challenging structural injustice and institutional harm while working within constrained systems (Goldingay, 2020). Forensic social work scholarship highlights the expanding role of social workers in justice-related settings, including detention, probation, and custody, where psychosocial intervention must be carefully balanced with legal and institutional mandates (Van Wormer *et al*., 2008). These tensions are particularly salient in rural or under-resourced settings, where access to specialized services may be limited (Peterson & Starks, 2014; Meng & Gray, 2025).

Within this complex landscape, social work with immigrants and refugees requires advanced clinical skills, legal knowledge, and advocacy competencies (Chang-Muy & Congress, 2023), as well as sensitivity to cultural and contextual factors shaping mental health and adaptation (Franco, 2018; Ellis *et al*., 2019). Contemporary social work theory emphasizes the integration of micro-, mezzo-, and macro-level interventions to address forced migration as both a psychosocial and structural phenomenon (Connolly & Harms, 2015; Murugan, Bender & Berg-Weger, 2025).

Against this backdrop, the present paper aims to develop a theoretically integrated framework for resilience-oriented psychosocial interventions in immigration detention and public custody settings. By synthesizing trauma-informed, ecological, resilience-based, and human rights-oriented perspectives, the paper positions custodial social work as a domain not only of risk management but of ethical intervention and adaptive support. This framework provides the conceptual foundation for examining

how social work practice can foster adaptation and resilience even within restrictive institutional environments, and it serves as the theoretical basis for subsequent empirical and applied research within the doctoral thesis.

2. Trauma-Informed and Stress-Adaptation Theories

Trauma-informed and stress-adaptation theories provide the conceptual backbone for understanding psychosocial functioning in contexts of forced migration, detention, and public custody. The model advanced in this section conceptualizes trauma not as a discrete event, but as a cumulative, socioecological process shaped by intersecting individual, relational, institutional, and sociopolitical factors. Within custodial settings, this perspective is essential for explaining both vulnerability and adaptive capacity among migrant populations.

At its core, trauma-informed theory emphasizes that exposure to adversity alters psychological, physiological, and relational functioning, often in ways that persist long after the precipitating events have ended. Gerber & Gerber (2019) situate trauma within a health-oriented framework, highlighting its pervasive impact on emotional regulation, cognitive processing, and somatic well-being. In migration-related custody, trauma is rarely singular; it encompasses pre-migration violence, migration-journey stressors, and post-migration institutional confinement, producing layered stress responses that require systemic rather than purely clinical interpretation.

A socioecological perspective is therefore central to the proposed model. Hardesty & Ogolsky (2020) demonstrate that trauma exposure and recovery processes unfold across multiple ecological levels, including individual coping capacities, family and relational systems, community resources, and broader structural conditions. Applying this logic to custodial social work allows trauma to be understood as embedded within legal regimes, institutional practices, and power asymmetries, rather than located solely within the individual. Stress-adaptation is thus conceptualized as a dynamic process shaped by ongoing interactions between persons and environments.

Within migrant and refugee populations, family and community contexts play a particularly significant role in mediating trauma and fostering resilience. Vesely, Letiecq & Goodman (2017) propose a community-based resilience model for immigrant families that integrates cultural meaning systems, relational support, and access to community resources. Their work underscores that adaptation under adversity is often collective rather than individual, and that resilience processes are culturally and contextually grounded. This insight is critical in custodial settings, where separation from family and community networks can significantly disrupt adaptive pathways.

Trauma-informed care frameworks translate these theoretical insights into practice principles that emphasize safety, trust, empowerment, and collaboration. Novilla *et al*. (2024) highlight the importance of professional training in trauma-

informed care, demonstrating that practitioners' understanding of trauma significantly influences service quality and client outcomes. In custodial environments, where institutional routines may inadvertently replicate dynamics of control and threat, trauma-informed training becomes a system-level intervention rather than an individual skill set. Keesler, Samways & McNally (2025) further conceptualize trauma-informed care as a transformative organizational process, requiring alignment across policies, staff practices, and service delivery models.

The ethical and human rights dimensions of trauma-informed practice are particularly salient in migration contexts. Lanfranchi & Akinsulure-Smith (2018) reflect on mental health counselling with urban refugees, emphasizing that trauma-informed interventions must be situated within a human rights framework that recognizes forced displacement as a consequence of structural violence. This orientation shifts the focus from pathology to protection, advocacy, and dignity, aligning trauma-informed care with broader social justice commitments in social work.

Stress-adaptation theories complement trauma-informed frameworks by elucidating the mechanisms through which individuals and communities respond to sustained adversity. Coping strategies, meaning-making processes, and spiritual or cultural resources play a crucial role in mediating stress responses. Ersahin (2022) demonstrates that post-traumatic growth among Syrian refugees is significantly associated with adaptive coping strategies and religiosity, highlighting that growth and resilience can coexist with ongoing distress. This finding challenges linear recovery models and supports a more nuanced understanding of adaptation as a non-binary process. Within applied intervention models, stress-adaptation is increasingly operationalized through body-based and community-oriented approaches. Grabbe *et al*. (2023) describe the Community Resiliency Model (CRM) as a neurobiologically informed framework that supports individuals in regulating stress responses and restoring a sense of safety. Such models are particularly relevant in custodial settings, where verbal processing may be limited by language barriers, cultural differences, or emotional overload. By focusing on physiological regulation and embodied awareness, CRM-informed interventions offer accessible pathways to stabilization and resilience. At the individual level, coaching and supportive relational models further contribute to stress-adaptation. Harper (2022) emphasizes the role of trauma-informed coaching in addressing barriers to progress rooted in past adversity. While developed primarily in non-custodial contexts, these strategies underscore the importance of pacing, agency, and relational atonement – principles that are directly transferable to social work practice in detention and custody environments.

Synthesizing these perspectives, the trauma-informed and stress-adaptation model proposed in this paper conceptualizes adaptation and resilience as emergent outcomes of multilevel processes. Trauma exposure initiates stress responses that are

shaped by ecological contexts; adaptation unfolds through coping strategies, relational supports, and institutional conditions; and resilience emerges not as the absence of distress but as the capacity to maintain meaning, regulation, and agency under constraint. Within custodial social work, this model provides a theoretical foundation for interventions that are ethically grounded, culturally responsive, and systemically informed.

This conceptualization directly informs the subsequent sections of the paper, which examine resilience-oriented intervention strategies and their applicability within public custody settings. By grounding practice in trauma-informed and stress-adaptation theories, social work is positioned to move beyond reactive crisis management toward proactive, dignity-preserving support for migrant populations in custody.

3. Acculturative Stress and Forced Migration Models

Acculturative stress constitutes a central explanatory construct for understanding psychological vulnerability and adaptation among migrants and refugees, particularly within contexts of forced migration and custodial confinement. Unlike general stress frameworks, acculturative stress theories focus specifically on the psychosocial challenges that arise when individuals are required to navigate and negotiate between cultural systems under conditions of structural constraint, social exclusion, and identity disruption.

Early comparative studies by Berry (1967) conceptualized acculturative stress as the psychological impact of adaptation demands generated by intercultural contact. This foundational work highlighted that stress outcomes are not solely determined by exposure to a new cultural environment, but by the interaction between individual characteristics, contextual conditions, and the strategies employed to manage cultural transition. Berry's later stress-perspective framework (Berry *et al*., 2006) further elaborated this model by situating acculturation within broader ecological and sociopolitical contexts, emphasizing that stress responses are shaped by power relations, societal attitudes toward migrants, and institutional arrangements.

Subsequent theoretical refinements have addressed both conceptual and methodological challenges in acculturation research. Rudmin (2009) critically examined the proliferation of acculturation constructs and measurement models, arguing for greater conceptual clarity in distinguishing between acculturation processes, acculturative stressors, and psychological outcomes. Roysircar-Sodowsky and Maestas (2000) similarly emphasized the importance of integrating ethnic identity and subjective meaning-making into acculturation models, highlighting that stress responses are mediated by how individuals interpret and internalize cultural change.

Forced migration introduces additional layers of complexity to acculturative stress. Research on Central American refugees by Donà & Berry (1994) demonstrated

that acculturation attitudes are closely linked to levels of acculturative stress, particularly in contexts characterized by uncertainty, trauma exposure, and limited social support. Pre-migration conditions further shape post-migration adaptation, as evidenced by the model of pre-acculturative stress proposed by Jasinskaja-Lahti & Yijälä (2011), which underscores that stress trajectories often begin prior to physical displacement. This insight is particularly relevant for migrants in custody, whose experiences are shaped by cumulative adversities across migration stages.

Empirical studies have consistently shown that acculturative stress is associated with a range of mental health outcomes, including depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress symptoms. Kartal & Kiropoulos (2016) found that acculturative stress significantly predicts PTSD, depressive, and anxiety symptoms among refugees resettled in different national contexts, suggesting that stress processes operate across diverse policy environments. Knipscheer *et al.* (2009) demonstrated that while both economic and forced migrants experience posttraumatic stress, forced migrants tend to exhibit higher symptom severity because of compounded trauma exposure and constrained acculturation opportunities.

Family dynamics and relational processes represent key mediating mechanisms in acculturative stress models. Research on serial migration and family separation among Mexican migrants highlights how disrupted family structures exacerbate acculturative stress and psychological distress (Rusch & Reyes, 2013). Similarly, Bostean & Gillespie (2018) showed that acculturative stressors reshape family relationships, influencing intergenerational dynamics and emotional support systems. These findings are particularly salient in custodial contexts, where family separation is often institutionalized, intensifying relational strain.

Social and structural factors further condition acculturative stress experiences. Lueck & Wilson (2011) demonstrated that social exclusion, discrimination, and migration-related stressors significantly contribute to acculturative stress among Latino immigrants. Peña-Sullivan (2020) extended this analysis by examining undocumented Latinx migrants, revealing how legal marginalization amplifies both pre-migration trauma and post-migration stress, producing heightened vulnerability. These insights align with broader forced migration research emphasizing the role of legal precarity and societal stigmatization in shaping adaptation outcomes (Kia-Keating *et al.*, 2015). Systematic reviews and meta-narrative analyses provide further evidence for the centrality of acculturative stress in migrant mental health. Choy *et al.* (2021) found that acculturation strategies are differentially associated with mental health outcomes, with integrative approaches generally linked to better psychological adaptation. Liem *et al.* (2021) similarly highlighted that coping strategies, social support, and access to resources play critical roles in moderating acculturative stress among migrant workers across global contexts. Mengistu & Manolova (2019) reinforced the need for

theoretically pluralistic approaches, noting that acculturation and mental health research must account for diverse migration trajectories and sociopolitical environments.

Within clinical and social work practice, the intersection of trauma and acculturative stress has received increasing attention. Rettger *et al*. (2016) emphasized that trauma and acculturative stress interact synergistically, with trauma histories often intensifying the psychological impact of cultural transition. Kuo (2014) proposed an integrative model linking coping, acculturation, and psychological adaptation, underscoring that adaptive outcomes depend on both individual coping capacities and contextual supports. Rogers-Sirin *et al.* (2013) further demonstrated that cultural mismatch between migrants and host societies significantly affects well-being, particularly among children and adolescents, reinforcing the developmental sensitivity of acculturative stress processes. Acculturation expectations and perceived congruence between anticipated and actual experiences also influence psychological outcomes. Mähönen & Jasinskaja-Lahti (2013) showed that mismatches between expectations and lived experiences predict poorer well-being among ethnic migrants, a finding with direct implications for migrants in custody, whose expectations of protection or opportunity may be sharply contradicted by detention experiences.

Thus, acculturative stress and forced migration models provide a critical theoretical lens for understanding adaptation in custodial settings. They demonstrate that stress responses among migrants are not merely individual reactions to new environments, but the product of cumulative trauma, disrupted identities, relational dislocation, and structural constraint. Integrating these models into trauma-informed social work frameworks enables a more nuanced understanding of resilience as a dynamic, context-dependent process rather than a static trait.

In the context of public custody and immigration detention, these theories underscore the necessity of psychosocial interventions that address both trauma histories and ongoing acculturative stressors. By acknowledging the multilevel nature of stress and adaptation, social work practice can move beyond symptom-focused approaches toward strategies that support identity continuity, relational reconnection, and culturally meaningful pathways to resilience.

4. Individual and Collective Resilience Frameworks

Resilience has emerged as a central theoretical construct for understanding adaptation under conditions of adversity, displacement, and structural constraint. In the context of forced migration and custodial environments, resilience frameworks offer a necessary counterbalance to deficit-oriented trauma models by emphasizing capacities for adaptation, recovery, and meaning-making at multiple levels of social organization. Rather than conceptualizing resilience as a static individual trait, contemporary scholarship frames it as a dynamic, relational, and contextually embedded process

shaped by interactions between individuals, communities, institutions, and socio-ecological systems.

At the individual level, resilience has been extensively examined in relation to mental health outcomes among forced migrants. Siriwardhana *et al*. (2014), in their systematic review of conflict-driven adult forced migrants, demonstrate that resilience is associated with lower levels of psychological distress, even in contexts of extreme adversity. However, the authors emphasize that resilience does not imply immunity to suffering; rather, it reflects adaptive functioning despite exposure to trauma. This distinction is particularly relevant for custodial social work, where resilience must be understood as compatible with ongoing vulnerability and distress.

Developmental and lifespan perspectives further refine individual resilience models. Suárez-Orozco *et al*. (2018) propose an integrative risk and resilience framework for immigrant-origin children and youth, highlighting how adaptation is shaped by intersecting domains, including individual competencies, family relationships, peer networks, school environments, and sociopolitical contexts. Although developed primarily for younger populations, this model offers transferable insights for adult migrants in custody, particularly regarding the cumulative and interactional nature of risk and protective factors. It underscores that resilience outcomes cannot be attributed solely to personal attributes but emerge through sustained engagement with supportive relational and institutional environments.

Beyond the individual, resilience increasingly occupies a central place in social-ecological and livelihood-oriented frameworks. Speranza, Wiesmann & Rist (2014) conceptualize resilience within social–ecological systems, proposing an indicator-based framework that captures the capacity of individuals and communities to sustain livelihoods amid environmental, social, and economic stressors. This approach is particularly valuable for forced migration contexts, where displacement disrupts access to resources, social roles, and economic stability. In custodial settings, where opportunities for livelihood reconstruction are severely constrained, this framework highlights the structural limitations placed on resilience processes and the importance of institutional conditions in enabling or obstructing adaptation. Collective and community-level resilience frameworks further extend the analytical scope. Saul (2022) conceptualizes resilience as a collective process emerging through shared meaning-making, social cohesion, and communal healing in the aftermath of collective trauma. This perspective is especially pertinent to migrant populations subjected to detention, where trauma is not only individually experienced but collectively reinforced through shared conditions of confinement, uncertainty, and exclusion. Collective resilience thus becomes a potential target for intervention through group-based, community-oriented, and culturally grounded social work practices.

Operational models of social resilience have been developed to capture these collective dimensions. Saja *et al*. (2018) propose an inclusive and adaptive framework for measuring social resilience, emphasizing inclusivity, participation, and adaptive capacity as core components. Their model underscores that resilience is contingent upon access to social networks, institutional responsiveness, and participatory governance. In custodial environments, where participation and autonomy are limited, this framework draws attention to the ethical responsibility of institutions to minimize harm and foster relational and procedural fairness.

Migration-specific resilience frameworks further illustrate the political and structural dimensions of adaptation. Bourbeau (2015) examines resilience at the intersection of migration and security, demonstrating how states, institutions, and migrant communities respond to new inflows of asylum seekers. This analysis reveals that resilience is not neutral but deeply embedded in power relations, policy responses, and discourses of control. In custodial contexts, resilience must therefore be understood not only as a personal or communal capacity, but also as something shaped – and often constrained – by migration governance regimes.

Emerging perspectives challenge mobility-centred assumptions within migration resilience research. Olumba (2025) introduces the Resilience-Accessibility Framework, which reconceptualizes resilience by focusing on immobility amid adversity. This framework is particularly relevant for custody settings, where mobility is explicitly restricted. It suggests that resilience may manifest through adaptive strategies aimed at preserving dignity, relational continuity, and psychological stability in place, rather than through movement or escape. Such insights expand the conceptual repertoire of social work by legitimizing non-mobilitarian forms of adaptation. Borderland and crisis-focused studies further highlight the spatialized nature of resilience. Bieńkowska (2024), in her analysis of the Polish–Belarusian borderland during the migration crisis, frames resilience as a multilevel process involving migrants, local communities, civil society actors, and state institutions. This work illustrates how resilience emerges through contested interactions across scales, reinforcing the idea that individual and collective resilience are inseparable from geopolitical and institutional contexts.

Synthesizing these perspectives, individual and collective resilience frameworks converge on several key insights relevant to custodial social work. First, resilience is a process rather than an outcome, shaped by ongoing interactions between people and environments. Second, resilience operates simultaneously at multiple levels – individual, familial, communal, institutional, and socio-ecological – and cannot be reduced to personal coping capacities. Third, resilience is ethically and politically situated, influenced by access to rights, resources, and recognition.

Within the broader theoretical model of this paper, resilience frameworks serve as the conceptual bridge between trauma exposure, acculturative stress, and adaptive outcomes. They provide the theoretical justification for psychosocial interventions that aim not merely to reduce symptoms, but to support meaning-making, relational reconnection, and agency under constraint. In custodial contexts, this implies a shift from viewing resilience as an exceptional personal quality to recognizing it as a collective and institutional responsibility, co-produced through humane policies, ethical practice, and supportive social work interventions.

5. Human Rights-Based and Ethical Approaches in Custodial Social Work Practice

Human rights–based and ethical approaches constitute a foundational pillar of social work practice in custodial and detention settings, particularly when working with migrant populations exposed to structural vulnerability, legal precarity, and institutional constraint. In such contexts, social work operates within environments where power asymmetries are pronounced and the risk of rights violations is heightened, necessitating a normative framework that goes beyond procedural compliance toward substantive justice, dignity, and protection.

Human rights social work is grounded in the recognition that social problems are inseparable from violations of civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights. Ife, Soldatić, and Briskman (2022) conceptualize human rights as both a moral foundation and a practical framework for social work, emphasizing that rights-based practice requires active engagement with structural inequalities and institutional practices that perpetuate harm. In custodial settings, this perspective reframes detained individuals not as objects of control but as rights-holders entitled to safety, humane treatment, and access to psychosocial support. Global social work scholarship further highlights the tension between cultural practices, state policies, and human rights norms. Katiuzhinsky & Okech (2014) argue that culturally responsive practice must be carefully balanced with universal human rights principles, particularly in contexts where state policies legitimize restrictive or punitive measures. This tension is acutely visible in immigration detention and custody, where legal frameworks may conflict with ethical obligations to protect well-being and dignity. Abbasov & Abbasova (2024) reinforce this concern by examining law enforcement practices in custody, underscoring the persistent gap between formal human rights protections and their implementation in custodial environments.

Ethical challenges in custodial care are not limited to overt rights violations but also encompass everyday practices that shape lived experience. Kusmaul, Bern-Klug & Bonifas (2017), drawing on long-term care contexts, demonstrate how ethical issues such as autonomy, informed consent, and respect for personhood become particularly complex in institutional settings. Although their work focuses on elder care, the ethical

dilemmas they identify are highly transferable to custodial social work, where restrictions on autonomy and decision-making are structurally embedded. Reflective and values-based approaches are therefore essential. Preston-Shoot & Höjer (2012) emphasize that social work practice must continually negotiate the balance between protection, control, and social justice. In custodial settings, this negotiation is intensified by the dual mandate of care and control, requiring practitioners to engage in ongoing ethical reflexivity. Banks (2020) similarly argues that ethical social work practice is not reducible to codes of conduct, but involves situated judgment, moral courage, and critical engagement with institutional power. Within justice-oriented frameworks, human rights–based approaches have been increasingly integrated into probation, community justice, and forensic social work. Cross (2017) demonstrates how rights-based practice adds value to desistance-focused interventions by foregrounding dignity, participation, and procedural fairness. Gelsthorpe (2013) likewise situates probation values within a human rights framework, highlighting the importance of proportionality, respect, and accountability. These insights are directly applicable to custodial social work, where psychosocial interventions must coexist with legal mandates and security concerns.

Emerging scholarship also addresses the need for practicable, context-sensitive rights-based practice in secure and forensic settings. Markham (2023) argues that while normative human rights frameworks are essential, they must be translated into actionable practice models that account for institutional constraints. This pragmatic orientation is echoed by Ewenson (2024), who highlights the pedagogical challenges of teaching human rights–based social work across diverse and restrictive practice environments. Together, these works underscore the necessity of bridging normative ideals with everyday professional realities.

Custodial environments such as prisons and detention centres present specific ethical dilemmas related to care, coercion, and punishment. Coyle & Fair (2018) advocate for a human rights approach to prison management, emphasizing that humane treatment and respect for dignity are compatible with safety and security objectives. Trestman (2014) further explores the ethical tensions inherent in working with incarcerated populations, arguing that protecting society and protecting human rights are not mutually exclusive goals but must be pursued simultaneously.

Custody-related decision-making also raises profound ethical and epistemological concerns. Tippins & Wittmann (2005) critique the empirical and ethical limitations of custody recommendations, calling for clinical humility and judicial vigilance. Although focused on family court contexts, their analysis resonates with broader custodial social work practice, where professional judgments can have significant and lasting consequences for individuals' lives.

Comparative perspectives illuminate how different institutional cultures shape ethical practice. Law (2017) examines divergences between social work practice and correctional services in Hong Kong, revealing how organizational logics influence the scope for rights-based intervention. O'Hara (2009) further complicates the picture by analysing the role of care work among prison officers, highlighting the blurred boundaries between custodial and social care roles. These insights challenge simplistic dichotomies between care and control, suggesting that ethical practice emerges through everyday interactions as much as through formal policy.

Synthesizing these perspectives, human rights–based and ethical approaches provide a critical normative anchor for custodial social work practice. They foreground the inherent dignity of individuals in custody, emphasize accountability and justice, and challenge institutional practices that perpetuate harm or exclusion. Within the broader theoretical framework of this paper, human rights and ethics function as the connective tissue linking trauma-informed care, acculturative stress models, and resilience frameworks.

In custodial settings, resilience-oriented psychosocial interventions cannot be ethically legitimate unless they are grounded in respect for rights and social justice. Human rights–based social work thus reframes resilience not as individual adaptation to unjust conditions, but as a collective and institutional responsibility to create environments that minimize harm and support human flourishing. This ethical positioning is essential for advancing social work practice that is both theoretically coherent and morally defensible within systems of custody and control.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This paper has developed an integrative theoretical framework for understanding and advancing psychosocial interventions aimed at fostering adaptation and resilience among migrant populations held in custodial environments. By systematically synthesizing trauma-informed and stress-adaptation theories, acculturative stress and forced migration models, individual and collective resilience frameworks, and human rights–based ethical approaches, the paper offers a multidimensional conceptualization of vulnerability and adaptive capacity within public custody settings.

These theoretical strands converge into a coherent conceptual model in which trauma exposure and acculturative stress are mediated by resilience processes operating across multiple ecological levels, within ethical and rights-based constraints. This model provides the analytical architecture for designing, implementing, and evaluating psychosocial interventions in custodial environments. In this regard, the present paper constitutes the theoretical foundation of the PhD thesis *Psychosocial interventions for the development of adaptation and resilience mechanisms in the public custody*

accommodation centre for foreign nationals. The framework articulated here performs several critical functions within the doctoral research. First, it establishes a comprehensive conceptual basis for understanding the psychosocial needs and adaptive capacities of foreign nationals in custody, grounded in contemporary social work theory. Second, it justifies the focus on resilience-oriented, trauma-informed, and human rights–based interventions as both theoretically coherent and ethically imperative. Third, it provides a clear rationale for the selection of intervention targets, assessment dimensions, and evaluative criteria in the empirical components of the thesis.

By anchoring the doctoral research in this integrated theoretical framework, the thesis is positioned to contribute not only to local practice development within the Arad Public Custody Accommodation Centre, but also to broader scholarly debates on custodial social work, forced migration, and resilience. The framework supports the development of interventions that are context-sensitive, culturally responsive, and institutionally feasible, while maintaining a strong normative commitment to dignity, justice, and human rights.

In conclusion, this paper advances a theoretically rigorous and ethically grounded model for understanding and supporting adaptation and resilience in custodial migration contexts. As the conceptual cornerstone of the doctoral thesis, it provides both intellectual coherence and practical relevance, laying the groundwork for empirical investigation and applied innovation in psychosocial social work practice with foreign nationals in custody.

Acknowledgement

In the preparation of this paper, the authors have used the ChatGPT artificial intelligence model (version 5.2) exclusively for the purpose of refining and finishing the expression of the text. The scientific content, argumentative structure and interpretations presented belong entirely to the authors. All suggestions generated by the AI have been critically analysed, verified and validated by the authors, who assume full responsibility for the accuracy, originality and integrity of the works.

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Social Work Theories and Social Capital in the Analysis of Community Cohesion: Systemic Perspectives on Migration and Rural Social Transformation

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Abstract. *This theoretical paper examines the role of social work theories and social capital frameworks in understanding community cohesion within rural contexts affected by migration. Drawing on classical and contemporary perspectives on social capital, particularly those advanced by Putnam, Bourdieu, and Coleman, the paper conceptualizes community cohesion as a dynamic, relational, and systemically embedded construct rather than a static social outcome. From a social work perspective, migration is approached not solely as a destabilizing force but as a structural driver of social reconfiguration that reshapes networks, norms, and forms of collective belonging in rural communities. The paper integrates ecological and community-based social work models to explore how migration-induced transformations influence bonding, bridging, and linking forms of social capital, with direct implications for trust, reciprocity, and social participation. Rural communities are theorized as adaptive social systems whose capacity for cohesion depends on the quality of relational ties, institutional responsiveness, and locally embedded resources. By synthesizing sociological theories of social capital with systemic social work approaches, the paper offers a conceptual framework for analysing community cohesion under conditions of demographic change. The contribution lies in advancing a theoretically grounded understanding of rural social transformation that can inform future empirical research and community-level social work interventions aimed at strengthening cohesion in migration-affected rural environments.*

Keywords: *social capital, community cohesion, migration, rural communities, social work theories, ecological models, community-based social work, social transformation.*

1. Introduction

Contemporary rural communities are increasingly shaped by complex social transformations generated by migration, demographic change, and structural reconfigurations of social relations. Within this context, community cohesion can no longer be understood as a stable or homogeneous condition, but rather as a dynamic process emerging from the interaction between social networks, shared norms, institutional arrangements, and power relations. Social work, as both a theoretical and applied discipline, offers an essential lens for analysing these processes, particularly through its engagement with social capital theories and ecological perspectives on community functioning (Goldschmidt & Rad, 2025).

Migration has become a central driver of rural transformation, influencing patterns of belonging, trust, and participation, while simultaneously challenging traditional forms of solidarity. In response, social work theory increasingly emphasizes relational, systemic, and context-sensitive approaches that account for both structural constraints and community resources. By integrating social capital theory with ecological and community-based social work models, this paper aims to provide a conceptual framework for understanding community cohesion as a socially constructed and adaptive phenomenon in migration-affected rural environments.

Social capital represents one of the most influential theoretical constructs for explaining how social relations contribute to collective outcomes. In classical sociological theory, Bourdieu (1986) conceptualized social capital as a resource embedded in durable networks of institutionalized relationships, closely linked to power, social position, and the reproduction of inequality. From this perspective, community cohesion is not evenly distributed but reflects differential access to social resources and symbolic capital.

In contrast, Coleman (1988) emphasized the functional role of social capital in facilitating coordinated action, framing it as a property of social structures that enables individuals and groups to achieve shared goals. Coleman's approach highlights norms, obligations, and trust as mechanisms that sustain social order and cohesion, particularly within close-knit communities.

Putnam's communitarian interpretation, critically examined by Siisiäinen (2003), shifts the focus toward civic engagement, associational life, and generalized trust as key components of social cohesion. While influential in policy discourse, this perspective has been criticized for underestimating power relations and structural inequalities. Together, these theoretical traditions illustrate that community cohesion is a multidimensional construct shaped by both relational density and structural conditions.

Ecological social work approaches extend the analysis of social capital by situating individuals and communities within interconnected systems spanning micro-, meso-, and macro-levels. From this standpoint, community cohesion emerges from reciprocal interactions between people, social institutions, and environmental contexts. Ungar (2002) emphasizes that resilience and well-being are not solely individual attributes but are co-produced through access to social, cultural, and institutional resources embedded in the community ecology.

Building on this perspective, McKinnon & Alston (2017) argue for an ecological social work framework that integrates social sustainability, community participation, and systemic responsiveness. In rural contexts, ecological approaches underscore the importance of place-based relationships, local governance structures, and informal support networks in maintaining cohesion amid social change.

Community-based social work further operationalizes these principles by prioritizing participatory processes, empowerment, and collective problem-solving. Rather than treating communities as passive recipients of intervention, this approach recognizes them as active agents capable of adapting to migration-induced transformations through the reconfiguration of social ties and institutional practices.

Migration fundamentally reshapes the social fabric of rural communities by altering demographic compositions, family structures, and patterns of social interaction. From a social transformation perspective, Castles (2010) conceptualizes migration as a structural force that reconfigures social institutions, labour markets, and systems of belonging, rather than a temporary or exceptional phenomenon. Papastergiadis (2018) further highlights the fluid and hybrid nature of contemporary migration, emphasizing processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization that challenge fixed notions of community and identity. In rural settings, migration can simultaneously weaken traditional bonding ties while creating new forms of bridging and trans local connections.

These processes often generate tensions between inclusion and exclusion, continuity and change. Social capital becomes unevenly redistributed, with some groups gaining access to new networks and resources, while others experience marginalization. Understanding migration as a driver of both fragmentation and reconfiguration is therefore essential for analysing community cohesion in rural contexts.

Rural communities are increasingly conceptualized as adaptive social systems capable of responding to external pressures through internal reorganization. Brown and Schafft (2011) emphasize that rural resilience depends not only on economic resources but also on the strength and flexibility of social networks, collective identities, and institutional linkages.

From this perspective, community cohesion is a relational achievement rather than a static condition. It is continuously renegotiated through everyday interactions, shared practices, and adaptive strategies. Migration introduces new challenges but also new opportunities for innovation, learning, and social recomposition.

Social work theories contribute to this understanding by framing cohesion as an outcome of relational processes embedded in broader socio-ecological systems. The capacity of rural communities to adapt to migration thus depends on their ability to mobilize diverse forms of social capital while addressing structural inequalities and power asymmetries.

The integration of social capital theory with ecological and community-based social work perspectives offers a comprehensive framework for analysing community cohesion in migration-affected rural environments. While social capital theories elucidate the relational mechanisms underlying cohesion, ecological approaches contextualize these mechanisms within complex systems shaped by social, institutional,

and environmental factors. This synthesis highlights the need to move beyond normative or idealized notions of cohesion toward a critical understanding that acknowledges conflict, inequality, and transformation. For social work research, such an approach enables a nuanced analysis of how migration reshapes community dynamics and how interventions can support inclusive and adaptive forms of cohesion.

Within the doctoral thesis *The effects of migration on community cohesion in the Romanian rural environment*, the theoretical perspectives discussed in this paper provide a foundational framework for both conceptual clarification and empirical analysis. Social capital theories offer key analytical dimensions for operationalizing community cohesion, while ecological and community-based social work models guide the interpretation of migration as a systemic and relational process.

By integrating these theories, the thesis can position rural communities as adaptive social systems whose cohesion is shaped by the interplay between migration, social networks, institutional structures, and local agency. This theoretical grounding supports the development of an empirically informed and socially relevant analysis, contributing to both academic knowledge and the advancement of community-oriented social work practice.

2. Social Capital Theories

Social capital has emerged as one of the most influential yet contested concepts in contemporary social theory, occupying a central position in analyses of community cohesion, inequality, and collective action. Its conceptual richness derives precisely from the plurality of theoretical traditions that have shaped it, as well as from the diversity of empirical domains in which it has been applied. Rather than constituting a unified theory, social capital represents a family of approaches that emphasize the value embedded in social relations, networks, and norms, while differing significantly in their ontological assumptions, epistemological foundations, and normative implications (Scholz, 2003; Swain, 2003; Koniordos, 2008).

Pierre Bourdieu's formulation of social capital constitutes one of the most structurally grounded and critical interpretations of the concept. In his seminal work on the forms of capital, Bourdieu (1986) defines social capital as the aggregate of actual or potential resources linked to durable networks of institutionalized relationships. This definition situates social capital firmly within a theory of social reproduction, emphasizing how access to networks is conditioned by power, class position, and symbolic domination. Social capital, in this view, is inseparable from economic and cultural capital and functions as a mechanism through which inequalities are maintained over time. Bourdieu's later reflections further underscore the relational and field-specific nature of social capital, highlighting its dependence on historically constituted social structures and struggles over legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1991). Subsequent interpretations

have extended this framework to contexts of migration and social inclusion, demonstrating how unequal access to social capital shapes adaptation processes and opportunities for integration (Asquith, 2019; O'Brien & ó Fathaigh, 2005).

In contrast, Coleman approaches social capital from a functionalist and rational-action perspective. Coleman (1986, 1990) conceptualizes social capital as a feature of social structures that facilitates individual and collective action, focusing on norms, obligations, expectations, and trustworthiness. His influential analysis of social capital in the creation of human capital emphasizes how family relations, community networks, and institutional arrangements contribute to educational and developmental outcomes (Coleman, 1988). Unlike Bourdieu, Coleman treats social capital less as a resource of power and more as a public good that enhances social efficiency. Nevertheless, his framework acknowledges the structural embeddedness of social relations, particularly through the concept of "constructed social organization," which highlights the intentional and emergent dimensions of social systems (Coleman, 1991, 1993). The epistemological divergence between Bourdieu and Coleman has been widely debated, especially regarding the tension between power-based and functional interpretations of social capital (Coradini, 2010; Rogošić & Baranović, 2016).

Putnam's contribution marks a decisive shift toward a communitarian and civic-oriented understanding of social capital. In this tradition, social capital is primarily associated with networks of civic engagement, generalized trust, and norms of reciprocity that foster collective well-being and democratic governance. While Putnam's framework has been highly influential in policy and applied research, it has also attracted substantial criticism. Siisiäinen (2003) famously distinguishes between Bourdieu's conflict-oriented and Putnam's consensus-oriented concepts of social capital, arguing that the latter risks depoliticizing social relations by underplaying power asymmetries. Edwards & Foley (1998) similarly contend that an exclusive focus on civic associations obscures the role of conflict, exclusion, and institutional inequality within civil society. Gelderblom (2018) further problematizes Putnam's notion of bridging social capital, demonstrating that bridging ties are themselves shaped by power relations and contextual constraints, particularly in stratified or marginalized communities.

Efforts to synthesize these competing traditions have generated a substantial body of integrative and critical scholarship. Tzanakis (2013) highlights the persistent measurement challenges arising from theoretical ambiguity, noting that empirical operationalizations often conflate distinct dimensions of social capital rooted in incompatible theoretical assumptions. Claridge (2018) and Poder (2011) similarly argue that the conceptual elasticity of social capital, while analytically attractive, risks rendering the concept theoretically incoherent if not carefully specified. Portes (2024) reinforces this critique by tracing the sociological origins of social capital and cautioning against its uncritical normative use, particularly in policy-driven research.

More recent contributions have sought to refine social capital theory by emphasizing relational specificity and contextual embeddedness. Kikuchi & Coleman (2012) propose a relational communication-based approach that foregrounds the quality and meaning of social ties rather than their mere presence. Schaefer-McDaniel (2004) extends this relational focus to youth contexts, advocating for a theory of social capital that accounts for agency, developmental trajectories, and environmental constraints. Wall, Ferrazzi & Schryer (1998) provide one of the earliest systematic applications of social capital theory to rural sociology, demonstrating how access to social goods is mediated by local networks, institutional arrangements, and spatial dynamics. These insights are further developed in applied domains such as education (Mikiewicz, 2021; Rogošić & Baranović, 2016), community development (Burnett, 2006), and public health (Kreuter & Lezin, 2002), illustrating the cross-sectoral relevance of social capital theory.

At the same time, advances in theory have been accompanied by methodological and measurement innovations. Engbers, Thompson & Slaper (2017) emphasize the need for theoretically grounded indicators capable of capturing both structural and cognitive dimensions of social capital. Van Bakel & Horak (2024) highlight the relevance of social capital theory beyond sociology, demonstrating its applicability to organizational and human resource research while reaffirming the importance of contextual sensitivity.

Taken together, these perspectives underscore that social capital is neither inherently positive nor uniformly distributed. Rather, it is a relational resource shaped by power, institutions, and social context, capable of producing both inclusion and exclusion. For the analysis of community cohesion in migration-affected rural environments, this theoretical pluralism is not a limitation but a strength. By drawing on Bourdieu's critical structural insights, Coleman's functional mechanisms, and Putnam's civic orientation – while remaining attentive to their critiques and syntheses – social capital theory provides a robust conceptual foundation for understanding how rural communities negotiate cohesion amid social transformation.

3. Ecological and Community-Based Social Work Models

Ecological and community-based social work models provide a critical theoretical lens for understanding how migration reshapes social relations, institutional arrangements, and lived experiences across local contexts. Unlike approaches that isolate migration as an individual or household-level phenomenon, ecological perspectives conceptualize migration as a multilevel process embedded in broader socio-spatial, political, and economic systems. From this standpoint, communities are not static containers of social life but dynamic arenas in which mobility, power, and adaptation intersect.

Contemporary migration theory increasingly emphasizes transformation rather than displacement alone. Castles (2010) advances a social transformation perspective that situates migration within long-term structural changes affecting labour markets, governance, and social institutions. This view is further elaborated in Castles' later work, which underscores migration as a constitutive element of modern societies rather than a temporary disruption to social order (Castles, 2025). Ecological social work aligns with this perspective by focusing on how macro-level forces – such as globalization, policy regimes, and economic restructuring – interact with meso-level community dynamics and micro-level social relations.

The destabilizing and reconfiguring effects of migration are particularly evident in the processes of deterritorialization and hybridity described by Papastergiadis (2018). Migration produces new cultural forms and social identities that transcend fixed spatial boundaries, challenging traditional notions of community cohesion rooted in territorial permanence. These dynamics resonate strongly with ecological models that conceptualize communities as open systems shaped by continuous exchanges of people, resources, and meanings across spatial scales.

Transnational and trans local approaches further extend this ecological understanding. Guarnizo (1997) demonstrates how migrant populations sustain transnational social formations that link origin and destination communities through economic, social, and symbolic ties. These networks complicate binary distinctions between sending and receiving contexts and highlight the persistence of multi-sited belonging. Etzold (2017) similarly emphasizes mobility trajectories and place-making practices, arguing that livelihoods and identities are constructed across interconnected spatial nodes rather than within isolated localities. For community-based social work, such insights underscore the importance of recognizing relational geographies and trans local networks when addressing cohesion in migration-affected communities.

Rural contexts present a distinctive ecological setting in which these processes unfold. Paquette & Domon (2003) conceptualize rural transformation as a process of social recomposition operating across multiple scales, where changes in population structure, land use, and economic activity reshape both social relations and symbolic landscapes. Migration contributes to this recomposition by altering household structures, care arrangements, and intergenerational ties. Singh (2019) highlights how migration-driven changes in household composition influence local livelihoods and adaptive strategies, reinforcing the need for community-level analyses that capture interdependencies between mobility, family systems, and social support networks.

Ecological social work models also draw attention to the role of power, governance, and institutional mediation in shaping migration experiences. Leitner (1997) illustrates how supranational migration frameworks reconfigure the spatiality of power, producing differentiated access to rights and resources across territories. These

governance dynamics are further problematized by Aliverti (2015), who shows how local communities are increasingly enlisted in the regulation and surveillance of migration, blurring the boundaries between social support and social control. Such developments pose ethical and practical challenges for community-based social work, particularly in contexts where cohesion is undermined by exclusionary practices and stigmatization.

Recent scholarship has expanded ecological perspectives to incorporate informational, legal, and systemic dimensions of migration governance. Dragomir-Constantin, Beldiman & Zlati (2025) demonstrate how access to services within the European Union is mediated by informational infrastructures that shape migrants' opportunities for inclusion and participation. From a social work standpoint, these findings highlight the importance of institutional connectivity and systemic accessibility as components of community cohesion. Similarly, Kjaer (2025) frames migration within a context of fragmented globalization, arguing for transformative legal approaches capable of addressing structural inequalities produced by overlapping regulatory regimes.

Urban and metropolitan analyses further enrich ecological models by illustrating how mobility reshapes spatial configurations beyond rural settings. Gil-Alonso & López-Villanueva (2023) examine spatial fragmentation and sustainability challenges in post-pandemic cities, revealing patterns of uneven mobility and access that resonate with rural–urban interdependencies. Although focused on urban environments, these insights underscore broader ecological principles relevant to rural social work, particularly the interconnectedness of spatial systems and the diffusion of migration impacts across territorial boundaries.

Ecological and community-based social work models conceptualize migration as a systemic process that transforms communities through complex interactions among mobility, power, space, and social relations. By integrating social transformation theory, transnational perspectives, and multi-scalar analyses of rural change, these models offer a robust framework for understanding community cohesion as an adaptive and relational process. For social work research and practice, this ecological orientation provides essential tools for addressing the challenges and opportunities posed by migration in rural contexts, emphasizing context-sensitive, participatory, and system-aware interventions.

4. Migration as a Driver of Social Fragmentation and Reconfiguration

Migration constitutes one of the most powerful forces reshaping contemporary societies, not merely through population movement but through profound transformations of social relations, spatial configurations, and systems of belonging. Rather than viewing migration as an episodic or external disturbance, recent theoretical

perspectives emphasize its role as a structural process embedded in globalization and long-term social change. From this standpoint, migration simultaneously generates social fragmentation and social reconfiguration, producing new forms of connection while destabilizing established patterns of cohesion.

Castles (2010) conceptualizes migration as a central component of social transformation, arguing that it reshapes labour markets, institutions, and collective identities across both sending and receiving contexts. This argument is extended in Castles' later work, which situates migration within processes of "fragmented globalization," characterized by uneven integration, regulatory complexity, and differentiated access to rights and resources (Castles, 2025). These dynamics challenge traditional notions of community rooted in territorial stability and cultural homogeneity, calling for analytical frameworks capable of capturing fluid and multi-scalar forms of social organization.

The cultural and symbolic dimensions of migration-induced change are foregrounded by Papastergiadis (2018), who describes migration as a turbulent process marked by deterritorialization and hybridity. Migratory flows unsettle fixed boundaries of identity and belonging, giving rise to hybrid social formations that transcend national and local frameworks. Such hybridity, while a source of cultural innovation and social creativity, can also intensify perceptions of social fragmentation, particularly in communities with strong place-based identities.

Transnational perspectives further illuminate these dynamics by highlighting the persistence of social ties across borders. Guarnizo (1997) demonstrates how migrants maintain transnational social formations that link origin and destination communities through continuous flows of resources, practices, and meanings. These formations undermine the assumption of return migration as a linear or definitive process and instead point to complex patterns of circulation and multi-sited belonging. From a community cohesion perspective, transnationalism introduces new relational configurations that can both enrich and strain local social networks.

In rural contexts, migration-driven transformations intersect with broader processes of social and spatial recomposition. Paquette & Domon (2003) conceptualize changing ruralities as multi-scale processes in which demographic shifts, economic restructuring, and landscape transformations reshape social relations and symbolic meanings. Migration alters not only population structures but also the everyday practices through which rural life is organized. Singh (2019) further demonstrates that migration reconfigures household structures and livelihood strategies, producing adaptive responses that reverberate across family systems and community networks. These changes highlight the interdependence between mobility, social reproduction, and local resilience.

Spatial reconfiguration is not confined to rural settings but unfolds across interconnected rural–urban systems. Gil-Alonso & López-Villanueva (2023) analyse how mobility transitions contribute to fragmented spatial patterns in metropolitan areas, generating sustainability challenges that reflect broader transformations in social organization. Although focused on urban contexts, their findings underscore the diffusion of migration impacts across territorial scales, reinforcing the need for ecological analyses that transcend rural–urban binaries.

Power and governance play a crucial role in shaping the fragmenting and reconfiguring effects of migration. Leitner (1997) illustrates how supranational migration frameworks reconfigure the spatiality of power within the European Union, producing uneven geographies of inclusion and exclusion. These governance arrangements influence how communities experience migration, often institutionalizing differential access to rights, services, and mobility. Aliverti (2015) further reveals how local populations are increasingly mobilized in the policing of immigration, blurring the boundaries between community participation and social control. Such practices can undermine trust and cohesion, particularly in contexts where migration is framed as a security concern rather than a social process.

Recent research has expanded the analytical focus to include informational and legal dimensions of migration governance. Dragomir-Constantin, Beldiman, & Zlati (2025) demonstrate how access to services in the European Union is shaped by informational infrastructures that mediate migrants' interactions with institutions. These infrastructures become critical sites where inclusion or exclusion is enacted, with direct implications for community cohesion. Complementing this perspective, Kjaer (2025) argues for transformative legal approaches capable of addressing the structural fragmentation produced by overlapping and often conflicting regulatory regimes in a globalized world.

These theoretical contributions converge on the understanding of migration as a driver of both social fragmentation and social reconfiguration. Migration disrupts established social bonds and spatial arrangements while simultaneously generating new networks, identities, and forms of belonging. For social work and community analysis, this duality is crucial. Recognizing migration as a transformative force rather than a unidirectional threat allows for a more nuanced understanding of community cohesion, one that acknowledges conflict and instability while also identifying opportunities for adaptation, innovation, and relational reconstitution within rural social systems.

5. Rural communities as Adaptive and Relational Social Systems

Rural communities are increasingly conceptualized not as static or residual social formations, but as adaptive and relational systems capable of responding to complex and often intersecting pressures, including migration, economic restructuring,

environmental change, and governance transformations. Contemporary rural studies emphasize that resilience and cohesion emerge through dynamic processes of adaptation, negotiation, and collective agency rather than through the preservation of traditional social structures. Within this framework, rurality itself is understood as a socially constructed and evolving condition shaped by both internal dynamics and external influences.

Brown & Schafft (2011) argue that rural communities in the twenty-first century are defined by their capacity for transformation as much as by their vulnerability. Resilience, in this sense, does not imply a return to a previous equilibrium but reflects the ability to reorganize social, economic, and institutional arrangements in response to change. This perspective aligns with broader shifts in rural research that conceptualize communities as open systems embedded in multi-level socio-ecological contexts.

The relational foundations of rural resilience are further elaborated through analyses of multifunctionality and social quality. Wilson (2010) emphasizes that resilient rural communities depend on the integration of economic, social, and environmental functions, supported by dense networks of social relations and shared norms. Multifunctionality enhances adaptive capacity by diversifying livelihoods and strengthening community ties, thereby reducing dependence on single economic trajectories. These insights underscore the importance of social networks as core components of rural resilience.

Social networks play a central role in mediating adaptive responses to change, as demonstrated in both Global North and Global South contexts. Rockenbauch & Sakdapolrak (2017) provide a critical review of social network approaches to rural resilience, highlighting how bonding, bridging, and linking ties facilitate access to resources, knowledge, and institutional support. Their analysis emphasizes that network structures are embedded in power relations and historical contexts, shaping who benefits from resilience-enhancing processes. Chaudhury *et al*. (2017) similarly show that local networks in rural Ghana underpin adaptive capacity by enabling collective learning, coordination, and risk-sharing, reinforcing the view of resilience as a relational and socially embedded phenomenon.

Recent scholarship has shifted attention toward everyday practices of resilience, emphasizing the agency of rural communities in shaping their own adaptive pathways. Flood, Mahon & McDonagh (2022) conceptualize rural communities as active agents of change within social-ecological systems, demonstrating how everyday actions and informal practices contribute to long-term resilience. This perspective challenges top-down approaches to rural development by foregrounding local knowledge, participation, and collective experimentation.

Resilience has thus emerged as a key conceptual lens for rural studies, offering a framework for integrating social, economic, and environmental dimensions of change.

Scott (2013) argues that resilience provides a heuristic for understanding how rural systems absorb disturbances while maintaining core functions and identities. However, resilience is not inherently normative or universally beneficial; its outcomes depend on governance structures, resource distribution, and the inclusiveness of adaptive processes.

Agricultural systems and food networks further illustrate the complexity of rural adaptation. Knickel *et al*. (2018) analyse the tensions between aspirations for sustainability and the realities of structural constraints in farming and rural development. Their work highlights the importance of equitable and participatory approaches to resilience that address social inequalities alongside environmental and economic challenges.

Governance plays a decisive role in shaping adaptive capacity at the community level. May (2022) conceptualizes rural communities as components of complex adaptive governance systems, where institutions, organizations, and individuals interact across scales. Effective governance, from this perspective, requires flexibility, learning, and coordination rather than rigid control. Complementing this approach, Salvia & Quaranta (2015) apply the adaptive cycle model to rural development, illustrating how phases of growth, conservation, release, and reorganization can inform the identification of resilient development pathways.

These perspectives converge on the understanding of rural communities as adaptive and relational social systems whose resilience and cohesion are produced through dynamic interactions among social networks, institutional arrangements, and environmental contexts. For social work theory and practice, this conceptualization underscores the importance of context-sensitive, participatory, and systems-oriented approaches to community cohesion. By recognizing rural communities as agents of adaptation rather than passive recipients of change, social work can more effectively support inclusive and sustainable forms of resilience in migration-affected rural environments.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The theoretical framework developed in this paper positions community cohesion in migration-affected rural environments as a relational, adaptive, and structurally embedded process. By bringing together social capital theories and ecological, community-based social work models, the paper advances an integrative perspective that moves beyond static or normative understandings of cohesion. Instead, cohesion is conceptualized as an outcome of ongoing social negotiations shaped by mobility, power relations, institutional arrangements, and local agency.

The discussion highlights that classical social capital theories – particularly those articulated by Bourdieu, Coleman, and Putnam – remain highly relevant for

contemporary social work research, yet require contextual and critical reinterpretation. As shown throughout the analysis, social capital cannot be treated as a universally positive resource. Rather, it is unevenly distributed, historically embedded, and often implicated in processes of exclusion as much as inclusion. This insight is particularly salient in rural communities undergoing migration-driven transformation, where existing bonding ties may be destabilized while new bridging and linking relations emerge under conditions of structural constraint.

Ecological and community-based social work models complement social capital theory by situating these relational processes within broader socio-spatial and governance systems. Migration, as conceptualized through social transformation and transnational perspectives, disrupts territorially bounded notions of community while simultaneously generating new forms of connectivity and belonging. Rural communities are thus best understood as open systems embedded in multi-level networks that extend beyond local boundaries. From a social work standpoint, this ecological orientation underscores the need to account for macro-level forces – such as migration regimes, informational infrastructures, and governance frameworks – when analysing local cohesion and designing community interventions.

The discussion further emphasizes that migration operates simultaneously as a force of social fragmentation and reconfiguration. While migration can weaken traditional forms of solidarity and generate tensions around identity, access to resources, and social control, it also creates opportunities for innovation, learning, and the reconstitution of social ties. This duality challenges deficit-oriented narratives that frame migration primarily as a risk to rural cohesion. Instead, the theoretical synthesis proposed in this paper supports an understanding of migration as a transformative process whose outcomes depend on relational dynamics, institutional responsiveness, and the inclusiveness of adaptive strategies.

Conceptualizing rural communities as adaptive and relational social systems provides a crucial bridge between theory and empirical inquiry. Resilience, as discussed in the rural studies literature, is not a fixed attribute but a process emerging from everyday practices, social networks, and governance arrangements. For social work research, this implies a shift from linear models of intervention toward process-oriented and participatory approaches that recognize communities as active agents of change. Such a perspective aligns closely with contemporary ecological social work, which emphasizes sustainability, relationality, and systemic awareness.

Within the doctoral thesis *The effects of migration on community cohesion in the Romanian rural environment*, the theoretical perspectives developed in this paper serve several foundational functions. First, they offer a coherent conceptual framework for operationalizing community cohesion as a multidimensional construct encompassing relational, institutional, and spatial dimensions. Second, they justify an analytical focus

on social capital configurations and ecological contexts as key explanatory mechanisms linking migration to changes in community life. Third, they provide a critical lens for interpreting empirical findings, enabling the doctoral research to move beyond descriptive accounts toward theoretically informed explanations.

Thus, this paper contributes to social work scholarship by demonstrating the value of integrating social capital theory with ecological and community-based models in the study of migration and rural cohesion. For doctoral research in social work, such integration supports a nuanced, reflexive, and context-sensitive approach that acknowledges both structural constraints and local agency. By framing rural communities as adaptive social systems shaped by migration-driven transformation, the thesis is positioned to make a meaningful contribution to academic knowledge and to the development of socially responsive and ethically grounded community practices.

Acknowledgement

In the preparation of this paper, the authors have used the ChatGPT artificial intelligence model (version 5.2) exclusively for the purpose of refining and finishing the expression of the text. The scientific content, argumentative structure and interpretations presented belong entirely to the authors. All suggestions generated by the AI have been critically analysed, verified and validated by the authors, who assume full responsibility for the accuracy, originality and integrity of the works.

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Volunteering and Career Choice Among High School Students: A Sociological Analysis of Education, Social Capital, and Professional Orientation

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Abstract. *The transition from school to the labour market represents a critical stage in the life course of young people, particularly in contemporary societies characterized by uncertainty, rapid social change, and increasing demands for adaptability. This paper explores the sociological relationship between schooling, volunteering, and career choice among high school students. Drawing on classical and contemporary sociological theories, including social capital theory, human capital theory, and theories of socialization, the study conceptualizes volunteering as a formative social practice that contributes to professional orientation. Volunteering is analysed as a space of experiential learning, identity formation, and network building that complements formal education. The paper argues that participation in volunteering activities during high school significantly influences students' career aspirations by enhancing self-efficacy, clarifying vocational interests, and expanding access to social resources. Furthermore, the role of schools as mediating institutions that can integrate volunteering into educational and career guidance frameworks is critically examined. The study concludes that volunteering constitutes a meaningful sociological mechanism supporting informed, socially grounded, and reflexive career choices among adolescents.*

Keywords: *volunteering, career choice, high school students, sociology of education, social capital.*

1. Introduction

In modern societies, the process of choosing a profession has become increasingly complex, particularly for young people approaching the end of secondary education. High school students are expected to make decisions that may shape their long-term social and economic trajectories, often under conditions of limited information and structural constraint. Sociology has long emphasized that career choice is not merely an individual preference but a socially embedded process influenced by education, family background, institutional contexts, and broader cultural expectations.

Schools play a central role in this process, functioning not only as sites of knowledge transmission but also as arenas of socialization where students acquire norms, values, and aspirations related to work and adulthood. At the same time, formal education alone is often insufficient to provide students with concrete insights into

professional life. As a result, extracurricular experiences and particularly volunteering have gained increasing relevance in shaping young people's career orientations.

Volunteering represents a distinctive social practice that connects individuals to their communities while offering opportunities for experiential learning. For high school students, volunteering may serve as a bridge between school and the world of work, providing exposure to social roles, professional environments, and institutional structures. From a sociological perspective, volunteering can be understood as a mechanism through which young people accumulate social capital, develop professional identities, and negotiate their future positions in society.

This paper examines the influence of volunteering on career choice among high school students through a sociological lens. By integrating theoretical insights from sociology of education, youth studies, and career development research, the study seeks to demonstrate how volunteering contributes to professional orientation and to discuss the implications for educational practice and policy.

2. Education, Socialization, and Professional Orientation

Education has traditionally been regarded as a key institution for preparing individuals for participation in social and economic life. According to Durkheim (1956), education performs a moral and social function by transmitting collective values and preparing individuals for their roles within society. Schools, thus, operate as mechanisms of social integration, shaping students' expectations regarding work, success, and social contribution. From a functionalist perspective, Parsons (1959) argued that schools act as systems of meritocratic selection, allocating individuals to occupational roles based on achievement and performance. However, sociological research has increasingly questioned the extent to which career outcomes are determined solely by merit. Scholars such as Bourdieu (1986) have highlighted the role of cultural and social capital in shaping educational and professional trajectories, emphasizing that access to resources and networks significantly influences career opportunities.

Career choice, particularly during adolescence, is deeply intertwined with processes of socialization. Family background, peer groups, and school environments contribute to shaping young people's aspirations and perceptions of feasible career paths. Hodkinson & Sparkes (1997) conceptualized career decision-making as a socially situated process, influenced by structural conditions and individual agency. Within this framework, volunteering emerges as a social experience that can expand students' horizons and challenge preconceived notions of professional life.

Volunteering is commonly defined as unpaid, freely chosen activity undertaken for the benefit of others or society as a whole (Wilson, 2000). Sociologically, volunteering represents a form of civic engagement embedded within social norms, institutional structures, and cultural expectations. Participation in volunteering reflects

broader patterns of social inequality, as access to volunteering opportunities is often shaped by socioeconomic status, educational attainment, and institutional support. Putnam (2000) emphasized the role of volunteering in generating social capital, understood as networks of trust, reciprocity, and cooperation that facilitate collective action. For young people, volunteering provides access to social networks beyond family and school, enabling interaction with diverse social actors and institutions. These interactions contribute to social learning and identity development. During adolescence, volunteering holds particular significance as a context for role experimentation and moral development. Yates & Youniss (1996) argued that community service during youth fosters civic identity and social responsibility, while also supporting personal development. For high school students, volunteering offers a structured environment in which they can engage with social issues and explore potential professional roles.

One of the key mechanisms through which volunteering influences career choice is experiential learning. Kolb's (1984) theory of experiential learning emphasizes the importance of concrete experience, reflection, and active experimentation in the learning process. Volunteering provides students with opportunities to engage directly in social practices that resemble professional activities, allowing them to test interests and competencies in real-world contexts. Unlike classroom learning, which often remains abstract, volunteering situates learning within concrete social settings. High school students who volunteer in educational, healthcare, environmental, or social service organizations encounter practical tasks, organizational routines, and interpersonal dynamics characteristic of professional life. These experiences contribute to a more realistic understanding of work and help students assess their compatibility with specific career paths. Research indicates that experiential learning through volunteering enhances students' self-awareness and vocational clarity (Astin & Sax, 1998). By reflecting on their experiences, students can identify strengths, limitations, and preferences, thereby making more informed career decisions. This reflective dimension is particularly effective when supported by schools through mentoring or guided discussion.

3. Skills, Self-Efficacy, and Employability

Volunteering also contributes to the development of transferable skills that are increasingly valued in contemporary labour markets. Communication, teamwork, leadership, and problem-solving are commonly identified as outcomes of sustained volunteering engagement (Eley, 2003). For high school students, acquiring such skills enhances both academic performance and perceived employability. From a sociological perspective, skill development through volunteering can be understood as an investment in human capital (Becker, 1993). However, unlike formal education, volunteering emphasizes informal learning and social interaction, which are crucial for navigating

complex work environments. Participation in volunteering fosters self-efficacy by exposing students to challenges that require initiative and responsibility. Self-efficacy plays a critical role in career decision-making, influencing students' willingness to pursue ambitious goals and persist in the face of obstacles. Adolescents who develop confidence through volunteering are more likely to perceive themselves as capable of succeeding in demanding professional fields. This psychological dimension complements the social and structural factors shaping career choice.

4. Social Capital and Professional Identity

Beyond individual skills, volunteering contributes to the accumulation of social capital. Bourdieu (1986) defined social capital as the resources accessible through social networks and group membership. Through volunteering, high school students gain access to networks that include professionals, community leaders, and peers with diverse aspirations.

These networks provide information about educational pathways, occupational requirements, and career opportunities. Informal interactions with mentors and professionals can significantly influence students' perceptions of certain professions, making abstract career options more tangible. For students from disadvantaged backgrounds, such access may partially compensate for limited familial networks (Wilson, 2012).

Volunteering also supports the formation of professional identity. Identity development during adolescence involves exploring possible selves and future roles. By engaging in volunteering, students enact provisional professional identities, testing how they relate to specific roles and responsibilities. Erikson (1968) emphasized that such exploration is essential for resolving identity crises and achieving a coherent sense of self.

Empirical studies suggest that adolescents who volunteer regularly demonstrate higher levels of career maturity and clarity (Youniss & Yates, 1997). These findings highlight the role of volunteering as a social context in which professional identity is negotiated and refined.

Schools play a crucial role in shaping students' access to volunteering opportunities and in mediating their educational impact. When volunteering is integrated into school culture through partnerships with community organizations or service-learning programs, its influence on career orientation is amplified. Eccles & Barber (1999) found that structured extracurricular involvement is associated with positive academic and developmental outcomes.

Service-learning represents a pedagogical approach that explicitly connects volunteering with curricular objectives. By combining community service with academic reflection, service-learning enhances students' understanding of social issues

and professional roles. This model aligns with sociological perspectives that emphasize the integration of theory and practice in education. However, sociological critiques caution against assuming that volunteering benefits all students equally. Musick & Wilson (2008) noted that access to high-quality volunteering opportunities often reflects existing social inequalities. Schools, therefore, have a responsibility to ensure that volunteering programs are inclusive and accessible, particularly for students from marginalized backgrounds. While the benefits of volunteering are well documented, it is important to adopt a critical sociological perspective. Volunteering should not be viewed as a substitute for structural reforms addressing inequalities in education and employment. Moreover, the instrumentalization of volunteering solely for career advancement risks undermining its civic and ethical dimensions.

Some scholars argue that excessive emphasis on volunteering as a career strategy may reinforce neoliberal narratives of individual responsibility, shifting attention away from structural constraints (Wilson, 2012). These critiques underscore the need to balance personal development goals with broader social considerations. In addition to its role in skill development and social capital formation, volunteering plays a significant role in shaping students' perceptions of the relationship between education and work. For many high school students, schooling is experienced as abstract and disconnected from real-life applications. Subjects are often perceived as requirements to be completed rather than as meaningful preparation for future professional roles. Sociological research on education emphasizes that this perceived disconnection may reduce students' motivation and clarity regarding career choices (Durkheim, 1956). Volunteering helps bridge this gap by contextualizing academic knowledge within practical and socially relevant settings, thereby reinforcing the functional link between schooling and professional life (Parsons, 1959).

From a sociological perspective, this reinterpretation contributes to what can be described as reflexive career orientation. Reflexivity refers to individuals' capacity to critically evaluate their experiences and integrate them into coherent life plans. Volunteering fosters reflexivity by exposing students to situations that require ethical judgment, interpersonal negotiation, and responsibility (Kolb, 1984). These experiences encourage adolescents to reflect not only on what they can do, but also on what kind of professionals and citizens they aspire to become, supporting identity formation during a crucial developmental stage (Erikson, 1968). The influence of volunteering on career choice is also mediated by peer interaction. High school students rarely experience volunteering in isolation; instead, it often occurs in group contexts facilitated by schools or community organizations. Peer discussions about volunteering experiences contribute to the collective construction of meanings related to work, success, and social contribution. Sociological studies of youth emphasize that peer cultures play a decisive role in shaping aspirations, particularly during adolescence (Hodkinson & Sparkes,

1997). When volunteering becomes valued within peer groups, it can normalize engagement with socially oriented professions and reduce stigma associated with care-based or public service careers.

Moreover, volunteering may challenge dominant narratives of success that emphasize individual competition and material achievement. Through direct engagement with social problems such as poverty, disability, environmental degradation, or educational inequality, students are confronted with alternative definitions of social value. These encounters can reshape career aspirations by highlighting the social impact of professional roles, reinforcing the civic dimension of work (Putnam, 2000). As a result, some students may be drawn toward professions in education, social work, healthcare, or public administration, motivated by a desire to contribute to collective well-being (Youniss & Yates, 1997). The temporal dimension of volunteering is also sociologically significant. Research indicates that sustained and long-term volunteering has a stronger impact on career development than short-term or episodic participation. Long-term engagement allows students to develop deeper relationships, assume increasing responsibility, and gain a more nuanced understanding of organizational dynamics (Wilson, 2000). These experiences are more likely to influence career trajectories because they provide continuity and progressive learning, supporting the accumulation of both social and human capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Becker, 1993).

Volunteering further contributes to the development of non-cognitive or "soft" skills, which are increasingly recognized as critical for professional success. These include communication, emotional regulation, empathy, adaptability, and conflict resolution. Sociological analyses of volunteering emphasize that such competencies are primarily developed through social interaction rather than formal instruction (Eley, 2003). For high school students, volunteering offers a unique environment in which these skills can be practiced and internalized through real-world engagement. The acquisition of soft skills through volunteering has important implications for social mobility. In contemporary labour markets, employers increasingly value interpersonal competencies alongside formal qualifications. For students from less privileged backgrounds, volunteering may provide an opportunity to develop and demonstrate these skills, partially compensating for unequal access to cultural and social resources (Bourdieu, 1986). From this perspective, volunteering functions as a mechanism that can, under certain conditions, support upward mobility and broaden career opportunities (Wilson, 2012). Institutional recognition of volunteering plays a crucial role in shaping its impact on career orientation. When schools formally acknowledge volunteering through certificates, credits, or integration into career guidance programs, its perceived legitimacy increases. Sociological research on education highlights that institutional validation influences how students interpret and value their experiences (Eccles &

Barber, 1999). Recognition signals that volunteering is not merely a leisure activity but a meaningful component of educational and professional development.

Career guidance counsellors and teachers act as key mediators in this process. Without structured reflection, students may struggle to articulate the relevance of their volunteering experiences to career decision-making. Through mentoring and counselling, educators can help students identify transferable skills and connect experiential learning to educational and occupational pathways (Kolb, 1984). This mediation reinforces the link between individual agency and institutional support, a central concern in sociological theories of career development (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997).

The cultural context in which volunteering occurs also shapes its influence on career choice. In societies where volunteering is associated with civic responsibility and collective solidarity, participation is more easily integrated into students' identities. Putnam (2000) argues that civic engagement strengthens social trust and shared norms, which, in turn, influence professional aspirations oriented toward public and community service. Educational systems play a decisive role in promoting these cultural meanings and in legitimizing volunteering as a socially valued practice. Globalization and technological change further complicate the relationship between volunteering and career choice. Emerging professions increasingly require adaptability, ethical awareness, and interdisciplinary skills. Volunteering exposes students to complex social issues that transcend disciplinary boundaries, fostering competencies relevant to global citizenship and socially responsible careers (Wilson, 2012). These experiences may influence students to pursue professions in non-governmental organizations, education, healthcare, or socially oriented entrepreneurship.

From a life-course perspective, volunteering during high school can be understood as an early investment with cumulative effects. Life-course sociology emphasizes that early experiences shape future opportunities and trajectories. Empirical research shows that adolescents who volunteer are more likely to remain civically engaged in adulthood, suggesting a lasting orientation toward social participation and public responsibility (Youniss & Yates, 1997). Despite its benefits, volunteering should not be idealized uncritically. Sociological critiques highlight that unequal access to volunteering opportunities can reproduce social inequalities. Students with greater institutional support or family resources may be more likely to engage in prestigious forms of volunteering, thereby reinforcing existing advantages (Musick & Wilson, 2008). These concerns underscore the need for inclusive policies that ensure equal access to meaningful volunteering experiences. Furthermore, the instrumentalization of volunteering solely as a career-building strategy raises ethical questions. When volunteering is pursued primarily for résumé enhancement, its civic and moral dimensions risk being diminished. Sociologists argue that a balanced approach is

required, recognizing volunteering as both a form of personal development and a social practice grounded in solidarity and responsibility (Wilson, 2000). In sum, volunteering occupies a distinctive position at the intersection of education, work, and civic life. For high school students, it provides experiential learning, supports identity formation, and expands access to social capital. By integrating volunteering into educational frameworks in an equitable and reflective manner, schools can support more informed, socially grounded, and meaningful career choices.

An additional sociological dimension that merits attention concerns the role of volunteering in shaping students' perceptions of inequality, opportunity, and responsibility within the broader social structure. Through direct contact with vulnerable groups or underserved communities, high school students are exposed to social realities that often remain invisible within formal education. Such exposure fosters critical awareness regarding structural constraints and social stratification, encouraging students to view professional roles not only as individual achievements but also as positions embedded within systems of power and inequality (Bourdieu, 1986). This awareness may influence career choices by orienting students toward professions that address social needs and promote equity. Volunteering also functions as a context in which students learn organizational norms and institutional cultures. By participating in structured organizations, adolescents observe patterns of authority, collaboration, and decision-making that resemble those found in professional environments. These observations contribute to anticipatory socialization, a process through which individuals internalize expectations associated with future roles before formally entering them (Parsons, 1959). As a result, students who volunteer may approach career transitions with greater realism and preparedness.

From the perspective of human capital theory, volunteering can be interpreted as an investment that yields long-term benefits through enhanced competencies and social positioning (Becker, 1993). However, unlike formal education, volunteering emphasizes informal learning and moral engagement, integrating cognitive, emotional, and ethical dimensions of development. This holistic form of learning supports more balanced career choices that consider personal fulfilment alongside economic outcomes. The reflective component of volunteering is particularly important in transforming experience into meaningful career insight. Reflection allows students to interpret their actions, evaluate outcomes, and relate experiences to future aspirations (Kolb, 1984). Schools that facilitate structured reflection – through counselling sessions, portfolios, or guided discussions – enhance the capacity of volunteering to inform career decision-making. Without reflection, the educational potential of volunteering may remain underutilized.

Furthermore, volunteering contributes to the development of civic identity, reinforcing the idea that professional roles carry social responsibilities. Adolescents who

engage in sustained civic activities are more likely to integrate ethical considerations into their career plans, viewing work as a means of contributing to the common good rather than solely as a source of income (Putnam, 2000). This orientation is particularly relevant in contemporary societies facing complex social challenges that require socially responsible professionals. In light of these considerations, sociological analysis supports the integration of volunteering into comprehensive career guidance frameworks at the high school level. Volunteering should be recognized not only as an extracurricular activity, but as a formative social experience that enriches education and supports informed career choices. By providing equitable access to meaningful volunteering opportunities and by embedding reflection and guidance within these experiences, schools can enhance students' capacity to navigate the transition from education to work with greater awareness, competence, and social commitment (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Youniss & Yates, 1997)

5. Conclusion

Volunteering represents a significant sociological factor influencing career choice among high school students. By providing experiential learning, fostering social capital, enhancing self-efficacy, and supporting identity formation, volunteering complements formal education and contributes to informed professional orientation. Schools play a vital role in facilitating access to volunteering and integrating it into educational frameworks.

In a context of increasing uncertainty and complexity, volunteering offers young people a meaningful space to explore professional possibilities and develop socially grounded aspirations. From a sociological perspective, recognizing and supporting volunteering in secondary education constitutes an important step toward more equitable and reflective career development processes.

Acknowledgement

In the preparation of this paper, the authors have used the ChatGPT artificial intelligence model (version 5.2) exclusively for the purpose of refining and finishing the expression of the text. They used AI to translate text from Romanian to English. The scientific content, argumentative structure, and interpretations presented belong entirely to the authors. All suggestions generated by the AI have been critically analysed, verified and validated by the authors, who assume full responsibility for the accuracy, originality and integrity of the works.

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CHAPTER 3. AGEING, DISABILITY & VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

Contemporary Social Work Theories in Promoting Active Ageing: Psychosocial Foundations, Intervention Models, and Well-Being Paradigms in Institutional Elderly Care

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Abstract. *This theoretical paper explores contemporary social work theories underpinning the promotion of active ageing within institutional elderly care, with a particular focus on psychosocial foundations, intervention models, and multidimensional well-being paradigms. Moving beyond narrow policy-driven interpretations of active and successful ageing, the paper adopts a critical gerontological perspective that conceptualizes ageing as a heterogeneous, relational, and context-dependent process. Drawing on active ageing and successful ageing frameworks, as well as hedonic and eudaimonic models of well-being, the paper situates well-being in later life at the intersection of individual agency, social participation, and structural conditions. The analysis integrates psychosocial intervention theories specific to gerontological social work, emphasizing biopsychosocial, developmental, and strengths-based approaches relevant to residential care settings. Particular attention is given to the evidence-based validation of therapeutic interventions, highlighting the importance of scientifically grounded practices in enhancing quality of life, autonomy, and emotional well-being among institutionalized older adults. By synthesizing critical gerontology, well-being theory, and evidence-based practice, the paper provides a comprehensive conceptual framework for understanding how social work interventions can support active ageing beyond normative and exclusionary models. The contribution lies in advancing a theoretically informed foundation for future empirical research and intervention design in residential elderly care, aligned with contemporary social work values and ethical commitments.*

Keywords: *active ageing, gerontological social work, psychosocial interventions, well-being, institutional elderly care, evidence-based practice, hedonic and eudaimonic well-being, critical gerontology.*

1. Introduction

Population ageing represents one of the most profound demographic transformations of contemporary societies, with far-reaching implications for social work practice, social policy, and the organization of care systems. In response to these changes, the concepts of active ageing and successful ageing have become dominant

frameworks shaping both academic discourse and policy agendas. While these paradigms have contributed to a greater recognition of older adults as active social agents, they have also generated critical debates regarding normativity, exclusion, and the uneven distribution of opportunities for well-being in later life.

Early formulations of active and successful ageing were largely grounded in normative models that emphasized productivity, independence, and continued participation in economic and social life. Timonen (2016) critically challenges these models by proposing a theory of "model ageing," arguing that dominant ageing paradigms often privilege certain life trajectories while marginalizing others. From a critical gerontological perspective, Van Dyk (2014) further demonstrates how the active ageing paradigm tends to appraise difference through deficit-based comparisons, reinforcing implicit hierarchies between "successful" and "unsuccessful" forms of ageing. Such critiques have prompted calls for broader and more inclusive conceptualizations that recognize heterogeneity, vulnerability, and structural constraints.

Within social work, these debates have profound implications. Classical and contemporary social work scholarship emphasizes that ageing cannot be understood solely through individual-level characteristics, but must be situated within relational, institutional, and socio-political contexts (Greene, 2017; Hughes, 2020). Social work with older adults, therefore, requires theoretical frameworks that balance agency and support, autonomy and care, while remaining attentive to issues of inequality, access to resources, and social exclusion. Minichiello & Coulson (2012) highlight the growing complexity of gerontological practice, noting that promoting positive ageing involves addressing intersecting dimensions of health, identity, social participation, and meaning.

In response to these challenges, social work scholars have sought to refine and expand active ageing frameworks to better align with professional values and ethical commitments. Teater & Chonody (2017) propose an actively ageing framework for social work practice that integrates empowerment, participation, and strengths-based intervention, while acknowledging contextual barriers faced by older adults. Their work underscores the importance of translating ageing paradigms into practice models that are responsive to diverse life courses and care environments. Hafford-Letchfield (2017) further contributes to this discussion by advancing critical educational gerontology as a means of fostering reflexivity, lifelong learning, and social inclusion among older populations, positioning education as a key dimension of active ageing.

Critical perspectives have also emphasized the ethical dimensions of ageing discourses. Boudiny & Mortelmans (2011) argue for a broader understanding of active ageing that moves beyond narrow behavioural indicators to encompass subjective experiences, social connectedness, and structural conditions. Pfaller & Schweda (2019) extend this critique by examining how dominant conceptions of the "good life" in old age risk excluding individuals whose circumstances do not align with normative

expectations of activity and independence. These ethical concerns are particularly salient in institutional care settings, where autonomy and participation are often constrained by organizational routines and care practices.

Anti-oppressive and critical social work approaches provide important counterpoints to technocratic or neoliberal interpretations of ageing. Hulko *et al*. (2019) emphasize the role of gerontological social work in challenging ageism, structural inequality, and marginalization, advocating for practices that centre older adults' voices and lived experiences. Similarly, Hastings & Rogowski (2015) highlight the tensions faced by social workers operating within neoliberal care systems, where managerialism and resource constraints can undermine relational and rights-based practice. These analyses underscore the need for theoretically grounded interventions that reconcile professional ethics with institutional realities.

At the intersection of social work and social policy, active ageing has become a key organizing concept for addressing demographic change. Zrinščak & Lawrence (2017) note that, while active ageing policies offer opportunities for innovation, they also risk shifting responsibility for well-being onto individuals, thereby obscuring structural determinants of ageing outcomes. From this perspective, social work occupies a critical mediating role, translating policy frameworks into inclusive and context-sensitive practices.

Against this backdrop, the present paper aims to examine contemporary social work theories in promoting active ageing within institutional elderly care. By integrating critical gerontology, well-being theory, psychosocial intervention models, and evidence-based practice, the paper seeks to move beyond prescriptive and exclusionary ageing paradigms. Instead, it advances a theoretically informed framework that recognizes ageing as a diverse, relational, and ethically complex process, thereby laying the foundation for subsequent analysis of intervention strategies and well-being outcomes in residential care settings.

2. Active Ageing and Successful Ageing Frameworks

The concepts of active ageing and successful ageing have become central organizing frameworks in contemporary gerontology, social policy, and social work practice. Emerging at the intersection of demographic change and welfare state reform, these paradigms have sought to redefine later life not as a period of inevitable decline but as a stage characterized by continued engagement, autonomy, and well-being. However, their theoretical evolution reveals significant conceptual tensions between normative ideals, empirical diversity, and ethical inclusivity.

Early formulations of successful ageing were strongly influenced by life-span developmental psychology. Baltes & Carstensen (1996) conceptualized successful ageing as a dynamic process involving selection, optimization, and compensation,

emphasizing adaptive strategies that allow individuals to maintain functioning despite age-related losses. This model highlighted agency and plasticity, but was later criticized for privileging functional capacity and individual adaptation over social context. Villar (2012) extended this framework by introducing generativity as a developmental task in later life, suggesting that contribution to others and to future generations constitutes a key dimension of successful ageing beyond physical or cognitive performance.

Parallel to these psychological approaches, active ageing gained prominence as a policy-driven concept. Foster & Walker (2015) describe active ageing as a European policy framework aimed at maximizing participation, health, and security across the life course. The World Health Organization's World Report on Ageing and Health further institutionalized this perspective by promoting healthy ageing as the process of developing and maintaining functional ability that enables well-being in older age (Beard *et al*., 2016). These policy frameworks have contributed to the development of multidimensional indicators, such as the Active Ageing Index, designed to monitor and compare ageing outcomes across societies (Buys & Miller, 2011; Zaidi, 2015).

Despite their influence, both active and successful ageing frameworks have been subject to sustained critique. Bülow & Söderqvist (2014) provide a historical analysis demonstrating how successful ageing evolved into a normative benchmark that implicitly distinguishes between "successful" and "unsuccessful" older adults. Timonen (2016) deepens this critique through the concept of "model ageing," arguing that dominant paradigms often reflect middle-class, able-bodied, and culturally specific life trajectories. Similarly, Zaidi & Howse (2017) caution that policy discourses of active ageing risk oversimplifying complex ageing experiences and shifting responsibility for well-being onto individuals.

In response to these critiques, scholars have proposed broader and more inclusive conceptualizations. Positive ageing frameworks emphasize subjective meaning, emotional well-being, and environmental fit rather than narrow indicators of activity or productivity (Ng *et al*., 2006; Nassir, Leong & Robertson, 2015). More recently, Fristrup & Rasmussen (2023) advocate for "artful ageing," foregrounding creativity, expression, and existential fulfilment as core components of later-life well-being. These perspectives resonate with social work's emphasis on dignity, diversity, and person-centred practice.

Empirical research further underscores the heterogeneity of ageing experiences. Teater & Chonody's (2020) scoping review reveals that older adults themselves define successful ageing in diverse ways, often prioritizing relationships, autonomy, and psychological well-being over physical health alone. Systematized reviews similarly demonstrate that active ageing is closely linked to quality of life but manifests differently depending on cultural, social, and institutional contexts (Rojo-Pérez, Fernández-Mayoralas & Rodríguez-Rodríguez, 2021; Pocock *et al*., 2023).

Determinants of healthy ageing identified in contemporary literature include social participation, access to services, environmental conditions, and cumulative life-course inequalities (Abud *et al*., 2022).

From a social work perspective, these findings highlight the limitations of universalized ageing models. Capability-based approaches offer an alternative normative framework by focusing on individuals' real opportunities to achieve valued ways of being and doing, taking into account both personal resources and structural constraints (Stephens & Breheny, 2019). This orientation aligns closely with social work's commitment to social justice and inclusion, particularly in institutional care settings where choice and autonomy may be restricted.

Recent intervention-oriented research emphasizes the need to translate ageing frameworks into evidence-based practice. Gheorghiu & Rad (2025) demonstrate that psychosocial therapies grounded in active ageing principles can enhance well-being and participation among institutionalized older adults when adapted to contextual realities. At the implementation level, systematic reviews indicate that effective healthy ageing interventions require organizational support, interdisciplinary collaboration, and sensitivity to residents' lived experiences (Owusu-Addo *et al*., 2021).

Active ageing and successful ageing frameworks represent evolving and contested paradigms rather than fixed theoretical models. While they have contributed significantly to reframing later life in positive terms, their application in social work requires critical adaptation. Integrating developmental, policy, and practice-oriented perspectives allows for a more nuanced understanding of ageing that recognizes diversity, vulnerability, and relational embeddedness. This integrative approach provides the conceptual foundation for examining well-being models and psychosocial interventions in institutional elderly care, as developed in the subsequent sections of this paper.

3. Hedonic and Eudaimonic Models of Well-Being

Well-being represents a central construct in contemporary gerontology and social work, serving as both a normative goal of active ageing policies and a key outcome of psychosocial interventions. Within psychological and social science literature, two dominant yet complementary traditions have structured the conceptualization of well-being: hedonic and eudaimonic approaches. Understanding the distinctions, overlaps, and empirical implications of these models is essential for developing theoretically grounded and ethically responsive social work practices with older adults, particularly in institutional care settings.

Hedonic well-being is traditionally associated with the pursuit of pleasure, happiness, and life satisfaction, emphasizing subjective experiences of positive affect and the avoidance of distress. In contrast, eudaimonic well-being focuses on human

flourishing, meaning, and self-realization, highlighting dimensions such as autonomy, personal growth, purpose in life, and positive relations with others. Ryan & Deci's (2001) foundational synthesis articulates these traditions as reflecting different philosophical assumptions about human potential, arguing that optimal functioning cannot be reduced to momentary happiness alone. Subsequent theoretical elaborations have reinforced this distinction while acknowledging their interdependence (Huta, 2016; Ryff, Boylan & Kirsch, 2021).

Empirical research has consistently demonstrated that hedonic and eudaimonic well-being represent related but distinct dimensions. McMahan & Estes (2011) provide evidence of differential associations between these forms of well-being and self-reported outcomes, suggesting that they capture unique aspects of psychological functioning. Cross-cultural analyses further confirm the robustness of this distinction while revealing contextual variations in how well-being is experienced and valued (Disabato *et al*., 2016). Advanced statistical modelling supports the conceptual separability of hedonic and eudaimonic components, even when they are empirically correlated (Joshanloo, 2016).

Beyond psychometric validation, scholars have explored the linguistic, emotional, and behavioural correlates of well-being. Rahmani, Gnoth & Mather (2018) adopt a psycholinguistic perspective, demonstrating that hedonic and eudaimonic well-being are reflected in distinct narrative patterns and meaning-making processes. Emotional intelligence has also emerged as a key factor linking both forms of well-being, with prospective studies indicating that emotional regulation and awareness contribute to sustained happiness and psychological growth across the lifespan (Extremera *et al*., 2011; Bhullar, Schutte & Malouff, 2013).

Behavioural pathways to well-being have received increasing attention, particularly in relation to everyday activities and lifestyle choices. Henderson, Knight & Richardson (2013) show that both hedonic and eudaimonic behaviours contribute to well-being, though through different mechanisms. In later life, leisure engagement and physical activity appear to play a particularly important role in fostering eudaimonic outcomes such as purpose and self-actualization (Ryu *et al*., 2022). These findings are extended by Chun *et al*. (2024), who demonstrate that leisure satisfaction mediates both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being among older adults facing health-related challenges, underscoring the relevance of contextualized and adaptive interventions.

Ageing-specific research highlights the importance of integrating well-being models into gerontological practice. Kim, Lehning & Sacco (2016), using data from the National Health and Aging Trends Study, confirm the multidimensional structure of well-being in older adults, emphasizing that psychological functioning in later life cannot be captured by single indicators of happiness or health. Ryff & Boylan (2016) further demonstrate that eudaimonic well-being shows stronger and more consistent

associations with long-term health outcomes than hedonic well-being, reinforcing its relevance for ageing populations.

Longitudinal evidence provides additional support for the centrality of eudaimonic well-being in later life. Joshanloo & Blasco-Belled (2023) document reciprocal relationships between depressive symptoms, life satisfaction, and eudaimonic well-being over a sixteen-year period, suggesting that meaning-oriented dimensions of well-being play a protective role against psychological decline. Conceptual approaches grounded explicitly in eudaimonia further argue that healthy ageing should be understood as a process of maintaining purpose, dignity, and relational embeddedness, even in the presence of functional limitations (Chindankutty & Dhanalakshmi, 2022).

From a social work perspective, the distinction between hedonic and eudaimonic well-being has important practical and ethical implications. While institutional care settings often prioritize comfort, safety, and symptom reduction – dimensions closely aligned with hedonic well-being – such a focus may overlook older adults' needs for meaning, autonomy, and self-expression. Integrating eudaimonic principles into gerontological social work supports interventions that foster agency, participation, and personal growth, even within structurally constrained environments.

In the context of active ageing, hedonic and eudaimonic models provide complementary lenses for evaluating intervention outcomes. Active ageing initiatives that emphasize participation and engagement without attending to subjective meaning risk becoming performative or exclusionary. Conversely, eudaimonic approaches that foreground purpose and self-realization align closely with social work's commitment to person-centred, strengths-based practice. Together, these models offer a comprehensive conceptual foundation for understanding well-being in later life and for designing psychosocial interventions that address both immediate quality of life and long-term human flourishing in institutional elderly care.

4. Psychosocial Intervention Theories in Gerontological Social Work

Psychosocial intervention constitutes a core domain of gerontological social work, providing the conceptual and practical foundation for promoting well-being, autonomy, and social participation in later life. Unlike narrowly medicalized approaches, psychosocial interventions emphasize the dynamic interaction between psychological functioning, social relationships, and environmental contexts, aligning closely with ecological and strengths-based perspectives in social work. In the context of institutional elderly care, these interventions are particularly salient, as they address not only individual needs but also the relational and organizational dimensions of care.

Early integrative frameworks highlight the necessity of grounding interventions in a comprehensive understanding of ageing processes. Kasl-Godley & Gatz (2000) provide a seminal synthesis of psychosocial interventions for individuals with dementia,

demonstrating how therapeutic approaches must be informed simultaneously by psychological theory, clinical practice, and an in-depth understanding of cognitive and emotional changes associated with ageing. Their work underscores the importance of tailoring interventions to cognitive capacity while preserving personhood and emotional meaning, a principle that remains central to contemporary gerontological social work.

The biopsychosocial model has been particularly influential in shaping intervention strategies. McInnis-Dittrich (2009) articulates a holistic framework for assessment and intervention that integrates biological health, psychological well-being, and social context. This model supports individualized care planning and recognizes that functional decline does not negate the need for meaningful engagement and psychosocial support. Greene (2017) further emphasizes that social work interventions with older adults must address family systems, social networks, and institutional environments, particularly in residential settings where older adults may experience loss of roles and autonomy.

Gerontological practice has evolved in response to demographic change and shifting care contexts. Richardson & Barusch (2005) argue that twenty-first-century gerontological social work requires adaptive, interdisciplinary approaches capable of responding to complex needs and ethical dilemmas. Their perspective situates psychosocial intervention within broader systems of care, highlighting the social worker's role in advocacy, coordination, and ethical decision-making. Wadensten (2006) complements this view by analysing psychosocial theories of ageing and their relevance to practice, demonstrating how theoretical models inform practical strategies aimed at maintaining dignity, identity, and participation in later life.

Clinical dimensions of gerontological social work further refine psychosocial intervention frameworks. Youdin (2014) outlines clinical practice models that integrate counselling, case management, and therapeutic support, emphasizing the importance of relational continuity and therapeutic alliance. These approaches are particularly relevant in institutional care settings, where older adults may experience cumulative losses and psychosocial vulnerability. Finnema *et al*. (2017) extend this clinical focus to dementia care in nursing homes, illustrating how structured psychosocial interventions – such as reminiscence, validation, and emotion-oriented therapies – can enhance quality of life and reduce behavioural and psychological symptoms.

Recent scholarship has reintroduced developmental perspectives into geriatric social work, challenging assumptions that development ceases in later life. Kumar (2023) highlights the relevance of developmental theories for understanding ongoing psychological growth, adaptation, and meaning-making in old age. From this standpoint, psychosocial interventions are not merely compensatory but can actively support developmental tasks such as life review, generativity, and identity integration. This

developmental orientation resonates strongly with eudaimonic models of well-being and with active ageing frameworks that emphasize purpose and participation.

Across these theoretical traditions, a common thread emerges: psychosocial interventions in gerontological social work are most effective when they are person-centred, context-sensitive, and theoretically grounded. Rather than focusing exclusively on symptom reduction or functional maintenance, these interventions aim to enhance subjective well-being, relational connectedness, and a sense of agency. In institutional elderly care, this approach challenges purely custodial models of care and supports the development of therapeutic environments that foster engagement, dignity, and meaningful participation.

By integrating biopsychosocial, developmental, and clinical perspectives, psychosocial intervention theories provide a robust conceptual foundation for practice in residential settings. This theoretical grounding is essential for evaluating and implementing evidence-based therapeutic approaches, as discussed in the following section, which examines the scientific validation of psychosocial interventions in institutional care contexts.

5. Evidence-based Validation of Therapeutic Approaches in Residential Care Settings

The growing emphasis on evidence-based practice has profoundly reshaped psychosocial intervention in residential care settings, including long-term care for older adults. Within gerontological social work, evidence-based validation is not merely a methodological requirement but an ethical imperative, ensuring that interventions promote well-being, dignity, and autonomy while avoiding harm or inefficiency. However, translating evidence-based models into residential contexts presents distinctive challenges related to institutional culture, resident complexity, and organizational constraints.

Early efforts to validate psychosocial therapies in long-term care focused primarily on cognitive and emotional interventions for older adults with dementia. Validation therapy represents one of the most influential early approaches, emphasizing empathic communication, emotional atonement, and respect for subjective reality. Systematic reviews conducted within the Cochrane framework highlight both the potential benefits and the methodological limitations of validation therapy, underscoring the need for rigorous evaluation designs while recognizing the ethical value of person-centred engagement in dementia care (Neal, Barton Wright & & Cochrane Dementia and Cognitive Improvement Group, 1996). These findings illustrate a broader tension within gerontological practice: the difficulty of operationalizing complex relational interventions within standardized evidence hierarchies.

Subsequent research has expanded the scope of evidence-based practice beyond specific therapeutic modalities to include implementation processes and organizational readiness. James, Alemi & Zepeda (2013) demonstrate that the effectiveness of evidence-based practices in residential settings is strongly influenced by contextual factors such as staff training, leadership support, and institutional culture. Their findings suggest that intervention fidelity alone is insufficient; sustainable outcomes depend on systemic alignment between therapeutic models and care environments. This insight is particularly relevant for institutional elderly care, where high staff turnover and rigid routines may undermine psychosocial intervention goals.

Assessment practices constitute another critical component of evidence-based care. Ebesutani *et al*. (2011) emphasize that evidence-based assessment serves as the foundation for effective intervention, enabling practitioners to match therapeutic strategies to residents' needs and capacities. Although their work focuses on psychiatric residential facilities, the principles articulated – standardization, clinical utility, and integration into practice workflows – are directly applicable to gerontological settings. Accurate assessment is essential for evaluating intervention outcomes related to well-being, functioning, and quality of life among institutionalized older adults.

Adaptation of evidence-based interventions to residential contexts has emerged as a key research priority. Klodnick *et al*. (2021) illustrate this process through the adaptation of dialectical behaviour therapy within residential care, highlighting the balance between fidelity and flexibility. While their study involves younger populations, the methodological insights are transferable to gerontological social work, particularly regarding the need to tailor interventions to cognitive capacity, emotional regulation, and environmental constraints. Such adaptive processes are consistent with person-centred and developmental approaches emphasized in earlier sections of this paper.

Provider attitudes toward evidence-based practice represent an often underexamined determinant of implementation success. Ringle *et al*. (2019) validate the Evidence-Based Practice Attitude Scale in residential care contexts, demonstrating that staff beliefs and openness significantly influence the adoption of validated interventions. In institutional elderly care, where psychosocial approaches may be perceived as secondary to medical or custodial priorities, understanding and addressing provider attitudes is crucial for fostering a culture of evidence-based gerontological social work.

Integration of diverse therapeutic models further characterizes contemporary residential care practice. Mutschler *et al*. (2022) document the integration of twelve-step approaches with evidence-based practices in residential treatment centres, illustrating how hybrid models can respond to complex client needs. Although their focus lies outside gerontology, the broader implication is that evidence-based validation does not require rigid adherence to singular models. Instead, integrative approaches – when

theoretically grounded and systematically evaluated – may enhance relevance and effectiveness in diverse residential populations.

Structural and systemic barriers to evidence-based practice remain significant. Kor (2024) identifies persistent challenges in therapeutic residential care, including resource limitations, institutional inertia, and competing care priorities. These barriers are particularly salient in long-term care facilities for older adults, where psychosocial interventions may be constrained by staffing ratios and regulatory demands. Addressing these challenges requires not only methodological rigor but also advocacy and organizational change, reinforcing the central role of social work within institutional settings.

Finally, outcome-oriented research underscores the long-term benefits of evidence-based psychological treatments in residential care. Powers (2008) reviews outcome studies demonstrating that evidence-based psychotherapies can improve emotional well-being, reduce distress, and enhance quality of life among residents of long-term care facilities. These findings provide empirical support for integrating validated psychosocial interventions into institutional elderly care, countering assumptions that therapeutic work is ineffective or impractical in later life.

The evidence reviewed in this section demonstrates that the validation of therapeutic approaches in residential care is a multidimensional process involving efficacy, implementation, assessment, provider attitudes, and organizational context. For gerontological social work, evidence-based practice must be understood as a dynamic and ethically informed endeavour rather than a static set of protocols. Within the framework of active ageing and well-being advanced in this paper, evidence-based validation serves as the bridge between theory and practice, ensuring that psychosocial interventions in institutional elderly care are both scientifically grounded and responsive to the lived experiences of older adults.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

This paper has developed a comprehensive and critically informed theoretical framework for understanding and promoting active ageing within institutional elderly care, grounded in contemporary social work theory. By integrating perspectives from critical gerontology, active and successful ageing paradigms, hedonic and eudaimonic models of well-being, psychosocial intervention theories, and evidence-based practice, the paper advances a multidimensional understanding of ageing that is both analytically robust and ethically grounded.

A central theoretical contribution of this synthesis lies in its reframing of active ageing as a relational and context-dependent process rather than a prescriptive or normative standard. As demonstrated in the earlier sections, dominant ageing paradigms – particularly those embedded in policy discourse – have often emphasized autonomy,

productivity, and functional independence as markers of "successful" or "active" ageing. While such frameworks have contributed to countering deficit-based views of old age, they have simultaneously produced new forms of exclusion by implicitly marginalizing individuals whose ageing trajectories are shaped by illness, disability, institutionalization, or socio-economic disadvantage. Drawing on critical gerontology, this paper has shown that ageing must be conceptualized as heterogeneous, structurally embedded, and deeply influenced by social inequalities accumulated across the life course.

From a social work perspective, this critique is not merely theoretical but fundamentally practical. Social work with older adults operates at the intersection of individual experience and structural constraint, requiring frameworks that can accommodate dependency, vulnerability, and relational interdependence without reducing older adults to passive recipients of care. In this respect, the integration of hedonic and eudaimonic models of well-being represents a crucial conceptual advance. While hedonic well-being remains relevant for understanding comfort, affective balance, and immediate quality of life – dimensions often prioritized in institutional care – eudaimonic well-being provides a deeper lens through which to examine meaning, purpose, identity, and relational belonging in later life. The evidence reviewed in this paper suggests that these eudaimonic dimensions are particularly salient for older adults facing transitions associated with institutionalization, loss of roles, and diminished autonomy.

The synthesis of psychosocial intervention theories further reinforces the centrality of relational and developmental dimensions of ageing. Gerontological social work interventions, as discussed in Section 4, are most effective when they move beyond symptom management and address the psychosocial processes through which older adults interpret their life experiences, maintain identity continuity, and negotiate changing relationships. Biopsychosocial, developmental, and clinical frameworks converge on the idea that ageing remains a dynamic process of adaptation and meaning-making, even in the presence of cognitive or functional decline. This insight challenges residual assumptions that institutional care necessarily marks the end of personal development or psychosocial growth.

Evidence-based validation, examined in Section 5, adds a further layer of complexity to this discussion. The growing emphasis on evidence-based practice reflects legitimate concerns regarding effectiveness, accountability, and ethical responsibility. However, the literature reviewed in this paper highlights that evidence-based practice in residential care cannot be reduced to the application of standardized protocols. Instead, it must be understood as a multidimensional process involving assessment practices, staff attitudes, organizational culture, and contextual adaptation. For gerontological social work, this implies that evidence-based validation must be aligned with person-

centred values and relational ethics, rather than imposed in a technocratic manner that risks undermining the very dimensions of well-being it seeks to promote.

These theoretical strands converge toward a reconceptualization of active ageing in institutional contexts. Active ageing, as articulated in this paper, does not denote constant activity, independence, or productivity, but rather the preservation and enhancement of agency, meaning, and relational engagement within the constraints of institutional life. Such a reconceptualization aligns closely with contemporary social work ethics, which emphasize dignity, social justice, and respect for diversity in life experiences.

In this sense, the present paper constitutes the theoretical foundation of the doctoral thesis focused on contemporary social work theories in promoting active ageing: psychosocial foundations, intervention models, and well-being paradigms in institutional elderly care. The framework developed here performs several essential functions within the doctoral research. First, it establishes a coherent conceptual architecture that integrates ageing theory, well-being research, and social work intervention models, thereby providing clear analytical lenses for empirical investigation. Second, it justifies the focus on psychosocial therapies as central mechanisms for promoting well-being and active ageing in residential care, grounded in both theoretical coherence and empirical evidence. Third, it situates the doctoral thesis within international scholarly debates in gerontological social work, critical gerontology, and evidence-based practice, ensuring its relevance beyond the immediate empirical context.

Moreover, this theoretical foundation enables a reflexive research stance that acknowledges the ethical and methodological challenges inherent in researching and intervening within institutional elderly care. It foregrounds the need to balance scientific rigor with sensitivity to lived experience, and standardization with contextual adaptation. By doing so, it prepares the ground for subsequent doctoral chapters focused on empirical analysis, intervention design, or program evaluation, while maintaining a clear normative orientation aligned with social work values.

In conclusion, this paper advances an integrative and critical theoretical framework that contributes to the field of gerontological social work by redefining active ageing in institutional settings as a relational, meaning-oriented, and ethically grounded process. As the conceptual cornerstone of the doctoral thesis, it provides both intellectual coherence and practical relevance, supporting the development of evidence-based, person-centred interventions aimed at enhancing the well-being, dignity, and agency of older adults living in residential care.

Acknowledgement

In the preparation of this paper, the authors have used the ChatGPT artificial intelligence model (version 5.2) exclusively for the purpose of refining and finishing the expression of the text. The scientific content, argumentative structure and interpretations presented belong entirely to the authors. All suggestions generated by the AI have been critically analysed, verified and validated by the authors, who assume full responsibility for the accuracy, originality and integrity of the works.

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Shadows of the Pandemic: Understanding COVID-19's Social and Psychological Impact on Older Adults

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Abstract. *The Sars-CoV-2 pandemic has generated profound and multifaced consequences for older adults, extending well beyond immediate physical health risk. This paper offers an empirically grounded analysis of its social, psychological and structural impacts, drawing on recent studies indexed in major academic databases. Findings indicate a marked increase in social isolation declining mental well-being and significant disruption in access to healthcare and social service. The analysis also underscores how the pandemic has amplified the existing structural inequalities affecting the elderly population. Adopting an interdisciplinary and human centred perspective the study integrates empirical evidence with consideration of dignity, resilience and social participation in later life. In addition, the paper examines coping mechanism employed by elderly and evaluates the role of social work interventions in alleviating crisis related challenges. The conclusions emphasize the need for inclusive, resilient and digitally accessible support systems tailored to an aging society alongside evidence based recommendations for public policy and professional practice.*

Keywords: *older adults, pandemic, loneliness, social work, resilience.*

1. Introduction

The pandemic has generated far reaching societal transformations, reshaping both public health system and patterns of social interaction worldwide. Within this context, older adults have been disproportionately affected, facing elevated risks not only in terms of morbidity and mortality, but also regarding psychosocial well-being (Ayalon *et al*., 2021). Empirical evidence consistently indicates that this population is more susceptible to severe manifestations of SARS-CoV-2 infection which justified the adoption of stricter protective measures (Wu, 2020).

Nevertheless, interventions such as prolonged isolation and restricted social contact have produced unintended consequences, notably diminished social connectedness and declines in mental health. Contemporary scholarship increasingly frames the pandemic not merely as biomedical crisis but as a multifaceted phenomenon with significant social and psychological dimensions. In this regard, the experiences of

older adults reveal complex interrelations between vulnerability, adaptative capacity and structural inequalities.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1. Aging and Multidimensional Vulnerability

Contemporary scholarship increasingly conceptualizes ageing within a biopsychological framework wherein health in later life emerges from the interplay of biological, psychological and social determinants (Ayalon *et al*., 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted this multidimensional vulnerability as elderly often already affected by chronic conditions, functional decline, or limited social ties experienced intensified risks to their well-being restrictive measures. Older adults often face pre-existing challenges, such as chronic illnesses, functional limitations, or limited social networks (Kelemen *et al*., 2019). Evidence indicates that crisis contexts tend to magnify preexisting vulnerabilities particularly among socially isolated population (Su *et al*., 2023). Concurrently, structural determinants such as income, housing quality, and healthcare access critically shaped the extent of risk exposure. From a life course perspective, vulnerability in old age is better understood as a dynamic outcome of accumulated inequalities rather than an inherent condition (Settersten *et al*., 2020).

Moreover, comorbidity defined as the coexistence of multiple chronic illnesses significantly intensified both medical and psychological risks during the pandemic (Jordan, Adab & Cheng, 2020). Older individuals with multimorbidity faced not only increased mortality but also greater dependency and diminished autonomy contributing to heightened perceptions of vulnerability and loss of control (Gavrila-Ardelean, 2021).

Ageism represents an additional layer of concern. Pandemic discourse frequently framed older adults as inherently frail and dependent, reinforcing exclusionary stereotypes and negatively inherently frail and dependent, and negatively influencing self-perception (Previtali, Allen & Varlamova, 2020; Ayalon *et al*., 2021). Such narratives risk obscuring the resilience and adaptative capacities and inclusive representations.

2.2. Social Isolation and the Feeling of Loneliness

In the literature on ageing during the pandemic, social isolation and loneliness are treated as distinct yet interrelated constructs. Social isolation denotes the objective reduction of social contact, whereas loneliness captures the subjective perception of insufficient interpersonal connection. Global analyses characterize the pandemic as an unprecedented challenge to a major public health concern (Wu, 2020). Empirical findings indicate that mobility restrictions and reduced face-to-face interaction significantly intensified loneliness among older adults (Pica, Grullon & Wong, 2024). Large scale investigations further confirm strong associations between pandemic

conditions and elevated levels of both isolation and loneliness within this demographic (*idem*). In parallel, systematic reviews demonstrate that such crise disproportionately affect individuals living alone or rural settings amplifying the prevalence of loneliness (Su *et al*., 2023). Loneliness should be understood not merely as social inconvenience, but as a critical health determinant, being linked to heightened risks of depression, cardiovascular disease and mortality (Holt-Lunstad, 2020). Longitudinal research conducted during the pandemic reveals not only increased prevalence, but also the sustained persistence of loneliness beyond pre-pandemic baselines (Bu, Steptoe & Fancourt, 2020), suggesting enduring consequences.

Importantly, the quality of social ties appears more decisive than their quantity. Older adults who preserved emotionally meaningful relationship despite limited contact reported better psychological outcomes than those embedded in broader yet less supportive networks (Killgore *et al*., 2020). Particular vulnerable elderly were institutionalized especially in long term care settings, where strict visitation policies though medically justified, often resulted in profound emotional deprivation and, in some cases, "generalized decline" (Simard & Volicer, 2020).

For a human centred perspective, loneliness during the pandemic was frequently experienced as a form of social invisibility. Many older individuals reported feeling overlooked by society underscoring the need to frame social isolation not only as public health issue, but also as matter of dignity and fundamental rights.

2.3. Impact on Mental Health

The Covid-19 pandemic has been associated with significant psychological repercussions among older adults, including elevated levels of anxiety, depression, and stress. These outcomes are closely connected to infection related fears, uncertainty, and sustained social isolation (Brooke & Jackson, 2020). Perceived isolation has been consistently linked to diminished life satisfaction and impaired psychological welfare (Dahlberg, 2021).

Longitudinal evidence further indicates that social isolation contributes to cognitive decline particularly through its association with depressive symptomatology (Liu & Jiang, 2025). At a broader level, pandemic related social disruption appears to have accelerated cognitive aging processes across populations (Nejad *et al*., 2024). Other analytic findings reinforce these concerns reporting a make increase in depressive symptom prevalence among older adults during the pandemic with rates nearly doubling compared to pre-2020 levels (Santini *et al*., 2020).

From a neuropsychological standpoint, chronic stress and social deprivation are known to negatively affect brain functioning, especially memory and executive processes (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009). During the pandemic, these effects were likely

intensified by reduced cognitive simulation and limited engagement in daily activities, thereby heightening the risk of accelerated cognitive decline.

2.4. The Digital Divide

The rapid expansion of digital communication and telemedicine has underscored persistent inequalities in digital literacy among older adults. Many individuals lacked adequate skills, devices, or Internet access, which limited their ability to benefit from these technologies and increased their social and healthcare related vulnerability.

Research shows that older adults often experience difficulties in navigating digital platforms which restricts access to medical services, social support, and interpersonal communication, further reinforcing social isolation. Digital exclusion is strongly associated with socioeconomic status, educational levels, and geographic context, with rural and low-income population lacing the greatest barriers to stable connectivity and appropriate device (Seifert, Cotten & Xie, 2021). Beyond material constraints, psychological factors such as fear of technology use and low self-efficacy also hinder digital adoption (van Deursen & Helsper, 2015). These findings suggest that digital inclusion depends not only on infrastructure but also on education and empowerment processes.

At the same time, the pandemic highlighted the protective potential of digital technologies in maintaining social ties and access to care. Older people who engaged in video calls, online communities or telemedicine reported reduced loneliness and improved access to support (Seifert, Cotten & Xie, 2021).

From a social work perspective, addressing the digital divide extends beyond technical solutions: it represents an ethical imperative aimed at ensuring equitable access to information, social participation, and essential service for this group of people in an increasingly digital society, especially during crises.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative integrative review design to critically synthetise existing literature on ageing, social vulnerability, and the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on older adults. Unlike systematic reviews strictly limited in time, the present methodological approach deliberately integrates both pre-pandemic sources and contributions from the pandemic period to ensure conceptual consistency a solid theoretical foundation and analytical continuity.

The identification and selection of sources were conducted by consulting major academic databases and scientific search engines. Inclusion criteria focused on articles published in peer-analyses as well as reference reports, published between 2005 and 2025. At the same time, older foundational studies were intentionally included as they

play an essential role in supporting central theoretical concepts such as isolation, loneliness, digital inequality, and biopsychological aging which although predating the Covid-19 pandemic are indispensable for proper understanding of its effects.

A thematic analysis was used to identify recurring pattens and key areas highlighted in literature. The main themes identified include:

- Social isolation and feeling of loneliness;
- Consequence for mental health;
- Access to health and social care;
- Digital inclusion vs exclusion;
- Structural inequalities and resilience.

Throughout the analytical process, an interpretative individual-centred perspective was adopted.

4. Results and Discussion

Scholarly evidence associates pandemic isolation with diminished quality of life and heightened psychological distress (Kadowaki & Wister, 2023). The absence of consistent social interaction contributed to feelings of abandonment and loss of purpose. In emotional strain and cognitive deterioration (Brooke & Jackson, 2020). Longitudinal studies conducted across Europe and North America confirm a notable decline in perceived social support during lockdowns, with significant consequences for emotional welfare (Krendl & Perry, 2021). Beyond subjective experiences, social isolation also entails measurable physiological effects, including increased inflammatory responses and weakened immune function (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). Reduced participation in social and recreational activities has been associated with decreased physical functioning and increased frailty among community dwelling older adults (Yamada *et al*., 2020).

Daily interaction, which previously reinforced roles such as that of grandparent, neighbour, or volunteer, has suddenly disappeared, causing many seniors to reevaluate their place and significance within the social hierarchy.

4.1. Psychological Distress and Coping Mechanisms

The epidemic situation has generated increased psychological distress among older adults, driven primarily by fear of infection and widespread uncertainty (Brook & Jackson, 2020). Despite these pressures, literature points to the existence of resilience resources manifested through adaptative strategies thus maintaining daily routines and drawing on spiritual beliefs (Ayalon *et al*., 2021).

Empirical studies point to complex emotional dynamics in which states of anxiety and sadness coexist with states of anxiety and emotional self-regulation (García-Fernández *et al*., 2022). Among the coping mechanism frequently identified are

engagement in meaningful activities structuring daily time and maintaining social relationship through remote means (Whitehead & Torossian, 2021). Social support, even in the absence of physical interaction provide to be a key protective factor against anxiety and depression (Santini *et al*., 2020).

4.2. Access to Healthcare and Social Services

Access to medical and welfare services was significantly affected by the unprecedented pressure placed on healthcare and social system which disrupted routine care. Seniors were directly impacted by this disruption as appointments were postponed and access to essential services was limited (Wu, 2020). At the same time, although telemedicine has become an alternative solution, its effectiveness has been diminished by the insufficient level of digital literacy among the seniors (Seifert, Cotten & Xie, 2021; Fang, Liu & Peng, 2024).

The postponement of medical interventions had significant clinical consequences, particularly for patients with chronic conditions increasing the risk of complications and deterioration in health status (Moynihan *et al*., 2021). At the same time, the suspension of preventive services, including screening and rehabilitation programs, contributed to delayed diagnoses and reduced functional recovery capacity (Coma *et al*., 2021).

4.3. Family and Informal Support Networks

Family and informal support networks acted as a critical buffer against the psychological strain of the pandemic, with older adults who maintained strong social ties reporting better mental health outcomes, while those without such connections faced increased vulnerability, highlighting the importance of community level support (Hussain *et al*., 2023). Moreover, integrational contact and sustained communication including digital interaction were associated with reduced loneliness and higher life satisfaction, where reliance on informal caregiving, though essential, imposed additional burdens on caregivers and, in cases of social isolation, community based initiatives partially mitigated the absence of support systems (Arpino *et al*., 2021; Beach *et al*., 2021).

5. Implications for Social Work Practice

5.1. Strengthening Social Connectedness

Within social work practice, the design of interventions targeting social isolation constitutes a central priority due to their demonstrable benefits for individual welfare with evidence indicating that structured approaches such as group based activities, peer support schemes and community enhance older adults quality of life when adapted to

cultural and personal context (Gardiner, Geldenhuys & Gott, 2018; Tong *et al*., 2021; Pârvulescu & Gavrila-Ardelean, 2025). Intergenerational programs and community support, including volunteer outreach and telephonic engagement, foster reciprocal interaction, mitigate age related biases and sustain emotional welfare particularly in post-pandemic settings where digital or hybrid formats extend accessibility and reinforce trust based social connections for old people living alone (Cattan *et al*., 2005; Jarrott & Smith, 2011).

5.2. Integrated Interventions for Mental Health and Digital Inclusion Among Seniors

Easy access to mental health services is an essential prerequisite for maintaining psychological welfare in old age and the role of social workers extends from counselling and crisis intervention to providing educational programs tailored to the specific needs of this population (Brooke & Jackson, 2020). Literature emphasizes the need to integrate these services into primary care and community settings, thereby increasing accessibility and reducing stigma (World Health Organization, 2021). Collaborative care models which combine medical interventions with psychological support have proven effective in reducing depressive and anxiety symptoms (Unützer, Katon & Callahan, 2002). Psychological interventions as cognitive-behavioural therapy, reminiscence therapy and mindfulness-based techniques yield significant benefits in managing emotional distress (Scogin *et al*., 2005), even though their adaptation to a digital format which was accelerated during the pandemic and raised access issue for certain groups. In this context, psychoeducation becomes a central tool for developing emotional self-regulation skills and increasing the sense of self-efficacy (Friedman, Tong & Rudin, 2020).

At the same time, bridging the digital divide is a strategic priority for facilitating access to services and strengthening social inclusion. Digital literacy programs, designed to suit the pace and needs of elderly people contribute significantly to increasing skills and confidence in using technology (Xie, 2011; Fang, Liu & Peng, 2024). The concept of digital inclusion goes beyond the mere availability of devices, encompassing dimensions as motivation, skills and confidence in digital environment (Seifert, Cotten & Xie, 2021). Studies show that the use of communication technologies helps reduce feeling of isolation and increase perceived social support (Chen & Schulz, 2016).

5.3. Advocacy and Policy Development

Priority areas for advocacy include expanding access to healthcare and long-term care services, improving income security and pension systems and promoting communities adapted to the needs of elderly population. Age-inclusive emergency

planning involves explicitly integrating the needs, capacities and rights in this group into crisis response strategies (HelpAge International, 2020).

A key role of social workers is to facilitate the active participation of the elderly in decision-making processes through participatory approaches that enhance the relevance and effectiveness of interventions (Buffel, Phillipson & Scharf, 2012).

6. Conclusion

Pandemic of Covid–19 has simultaneously brought to light both the structural vulnerabilities and the resilience of elderly with effects that extend beyond physical health to encompass social and psychological dimensions (Ayalon *et al*., 2021). In this context it is necessary to adopt a person-centred approach that integrates medical and social services, reduces digital exclusion and builds community networks, while also developing mental health interventions tailored to vulnerable groups and inclusive crisis preparedness policies (Brooke & Jackson, 2020; United Nations, 2020; Ayalon *et al*., 2021; Hussain *et al*., 2023; Fang, Liu & Peng, 2024).

More than a health crisis the pandemic represents a moment to reconfigure how aging and care are understood, underlining the need for sustainable investments in social infrastructure and support services. In this context, the role of social work becomes essential in reducing systemic gaps and promoting the dignity, participation and welfare of elderly, while also reflecting a collective ethical responsibility.

Acknowledgement

Artificial intelligence-based tools were used exclusively for linguistic editing and translation refinement, without contributing to the scientific content of the manuscript.

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The Impact of Digitalization and Empathy On Social Benefits and the Quality of Life for People With Severe Disabilities

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Abstract. *The social services are beneficial for the quality of life of people with severe disabilities, both in the pre inclusive rehabilitation phase and in the phase of social integration of people with disabilities. The digitization of the public social welfare system, which aims to make services faster and more efficient, is not an end in itself but must be integrated into a broader perspective. Only an integrated approach can guarantee a real support to the person with disabilities and their families, overcoming the discontinuity between different services and intervening in a global way to promote the autonomy and the dignity of people. In this paper we analyse the benefits of social services in supporting people with severe disabilities within the inclusive vision of the public social welfare system. We reflect particularly on the impact of the digitization of social and health services on the accessibility of social services and how the social worker-beneficiary relationship is transformed from the point of view of empathy. The paper further explores the advantages and limitations of social services that provide support and care to people with severe disabilities. Therefore, the chapter highlights the importance of an integrated digital system that facilitates the social worker-beneficiary relationship and makes social interventions more effective, while preserving the human dimension. Social services, supported by inclusive and digital processes and practices rich in empathy, can offer important contributions substantially relevant to guaranteeing and improving the quality of life of people with severe disabilities.*

Keywords: *social benefits, severe disability, quality of life, digitalization, empathy, social inclusion, social policies, social work.*

1. Introduction

People with severe disabilities are facing a number of challenges that hamper their access to, participation in, and integration in society and daily life. The social welfare system can play a significant role in reducing inequalities and promoting the well-being of people with disabilities. The digitization of social services is an important aspect of this system that can make administrative procedures more efficient, clear, and accessible. However, the digitization of social services also has potential pitfalls, including the risk for people with disabilities of being excluded because of difficulties using digital technology.

This paper discusses the relationship between social services, digitization, empathy, and change and, thereby, give examples of how these factors can be used to improve the quality of life for people with severe disabilities. The paper first of all present the theoretical and legal framework for social services. Then the results are presented and analysed with respect to the process of digitalization and the empathetic dimension of the social services. The chapter ends with some conclusions and practical recommendations for social work and social services based on these findings.

People with severe disabilities encounter obstacles regarding access to services and participation in the community life and also have difficulties in being truly included in the social benefits system (Gavrila-Ardelean, Horvath, & Gavrila-Ardelean, 2024). Digitalization is not just a technological transformation; it also generates a series of social changes and alterations which must be taken into consideration in designing the services provided to the persons with disabilities and their beneficiaries. In practical life, people with severe disabilities appreciate easy access to social benefits because this makes a real difference in their lives, facilitating their independence, participation, and inclusion in community life. The social protection system needs to integrate technologies in order to adapt to changes and to use them at the service of users.

Processes such as submission of electronic files, simplification of administrative procedures, and increased communication between institutions and entities involved have gradually become the norm in the last years. These changes have brought transparency in the allocation and payment of social benefits and efficiency in implementing policies and programs. Social work is currently becoming a highly specialized field, efficiently organized, highly accessible, and with a focus on the beneficiary's needs (Rădăcină, 2023). However, for all users to experience these benefits, it is essential that digital platforms should be adapted to ensure accessibility for persons with disabilities (Marin & Popa, 2024; Mariș & Gavrilă-Ardelean, 2025).

In order to support beneficiaries with disabilities, digital solutions have been proposed, such as applications that assist and facilitate daily tasks. A crucial factor that may influence the effectiveness of these solutions is the beneficiaries' skills and access to technology and devices. Although not all disabilities are incompatible with using technology, some of them may actually constitute obstacles, so that digitalization may become a cause of social exclusion (Iftimoaei & Achiței, 2023). In this context, social policies should establish measures aimed at reducing and controlling the gaps, and also at integrating vulnerable people in the digital society.

Empathy is another aspect, always a component of social work practice. The relationship between the social worker and the beneficiary must not be limited to an "administrative" relationship based on the drafting and accomplishment of various procedures (Cojocaru, 2010). Empathy facilitates a better identification of the real

needs, to design a targeted intervention approach for each case (Cojocaru & Cojocaru, 2008).

Empathy is not exiled in the digital age. On the contrary, it finds new premises to unfold, it gets reinforced and amplified in order to better address and solve the problems of the socially needy through access facilitated by information and communication technologies and complex services tailored to the needs of the beneficiaries by compassionate counsellors. Both technologies and values based on ethics and altruism are thus necessary and come in support of and amplify each other in building and performing an efficient social assistance system (Neamțu, 2011; Crăciun, 2006).

Taking into account the complex dynamics of the quality of life of people with severe disabilities, an integrated approach has to be adopted in trying to improve it. This integrated approach should encompass all the levels of assistance – technology, social benefits, and the human dimension of the relation with the assisted. In an ever changing society, the social assistance system must be adapted in order to ensure the integration and equal opportunities of people with disabilities (Pașa, 2004a, 2004b; Pașa & Pașa, 2003).

2. Conceptual and Legislative Framework

There are millions of people with severe disabilities, vulnerable people that cannot make anything without others' help, being often dependent on others for daily living activities, needing support in all aspects of life. People with severe disabilities are vulnerable, they have severe difficulties in daily living and are in need of support and understanding. Living with a severe disability can make life more challenging and can limit a person's ability to participate in everyday life activities, but severe disability is no one's fault. A severe disability is a serious health condition that impairs a person's health, greatly affecting their life and that of their family members. All of us have to be more understanding and compassionate to people with severe disabilities.

Social benefits are the principal means of support for people with special needs and disabilities in Romania. The legislation which governs such benefits grants the support to people with severe disabilities according to the severity of their disability and the specific type of support they require. Therefore, the social protection system does not simply apply general rules to all disabled people; rather, its interventions are a series of personalised decisions aimed at ensuring the integration and guarantee of equal opportunities for all (Sandu, 2010).

Legislative and conceptual frameworks are essential foundations for the development of digital solutions for social assistance. Digitalisation of social services has to respect the fundamental rights of people with disabilities and consider their needs in terms of accessibility of services and participation. Digitalisation should not produce

"excluded" people, on the contrary, it must ensure their active participation. In Europe, laws encourage the development of digital platforms and transparency of public administration processes to make social benefits more accessible and simpler to manage.

Social benefits are essential tools. Social policies help reduce inequalities and support the inclusion of vulnerable people (Gavrila-Ardelean, 2022). The digital dimension should also be incorporated into the legislative and conceptual framework of social assistance. When designing a package of services and implementing them, it is necessary to reconsider the digitalization of social assistance in order to increase accessibility and efficiency of assistance provided to citizens through the social system reform approach. Digitalization must take into account the needs of people with disabilities, so that technology becomes a means of inclusion rather than exclusion. A new conceptual framework should be developed in order to modernize the social assistance system and increase the impact of assistance on the quality of life of its beneficiaries.

Disability benefits are an important component of the social protection strategy. Standard monthly disability benefits vary according to the degree of disability and are intended to cover monthly costs associated with fulfilling basic needs and making needed adaptations to the home to ensure mobility. These benefits guarantee the right to economic security and enable individuals with disabilities to live with dignity and maintain a minimum acceptable standard of living, thereby avoiding extreme poverty.

In practical terms, research has shown again and again that social benefits have a big impact on personal freedom and social participation. People with disabilities, mental health issues, or other advantages and disadvantages in life need support to live autonomously, to choose a path of education and employment suited to their abilities, and to be able and active members of the community. Without these supports, people with disabilities run the risk of entering a life of isolation, of becoming overly dependent on their family, or of entering poverty.

Social benefits for people with disabilities are a matter of importance for society. They serve to equalize opportunities for persons with severe disabilities. Everyone deserves the chance to fulfil their potential and social benefits help to make that possible. Furthermore, these benefits foster social inclusion for individuals with severe disabilities. By receiving an appropriate level of support through social benefits, they are able to engage with services, receive an education, and be part of activities and functions that enhance their quality of life. Social benefits also empower individuals with disabilities to live actively and to not feel excluded or marginalised by society.

Assistance and support to people with severe disabilities can be provided by other entities, based on Law No. 448/2006 on the rights of people with severe disabilities and the ways in which the state can support them, under the premise that anyone with a disability has the right to be an autonomous and equal member of society. All individuals

with significant disabilities must live with dignity and be guaranteed basic rights. The Social Assistance Law No. 292/2011 reinforces the concept of integrated services within social assistance, providing a systematic approach to providing services that are responsive to the needs of each individual assisted.

New research finds that social benefits must be matched by measures that allow people with disabilities to integrate professionally and socially. Digital skills and technologies can empower people with disabilities to become more independent and enable their integration into the labour market. The studies also show that the integration of people with disabilities depends on well-defined public policies and efficient adaptation of the social services to the economic and social changes. A dynamic social policy that ensures real opportunities for integration and quality of life for people with disabilities is needed.

3. The Impact of Social Benefits on Recipients

Social benefits for people with severe disabilities have a significant impact on their quality of life. By enabling the people with severe disabilities and their caregivers to make choices regarding their lifestyle, social and economic integration, and their overall well-being, they promote their autonomy and provide economic security.

Autonomy is one of the areas where social benefits have the most impact. People with severe disabilities receive allowances and supplementary budgets for disability which enable them to manage their basic needs on an everyday basis. By receiving such financial support, they are able to make choices regarding education, employment (adapted jobs), and leisure time, and to participate in life situations from which they would otherwise be excluded. Thus, social benefits are not limited to ensuring basic needs; they also facilitate the development of people with severe disabilities on various levels and their social integration (Corman, 2022).

Social inclusion is a priority goal for supporting and including people with severe disabilities. Often, people with disabilities with severe limitations are denied the opportunity to take part in life because of physical, cultural, or economic barriers. Social benefits for disabled people, alongside other benefits and services such as free travel to or from medical appointments and specialist health services, can go a long way to ensuring that people can participate in and be part of community life, and can work towards social inclusion. This helps to create opportunities for social participation and contribution to social life, and prevent isolation and marginalisation of people with disabilities, ensuring that their rights and human dignity are recognised.

Reducing the risk of poverty is one of the main benefits of social assistance. People with significant disabilities may need additional financial support to access the health care services, transportation, equipment and/or services they need. If they receive insufficient financial support for these expenses, they and/or their families may face

financial difficulty or excessive dependence on family and/or institutions. Social benefits help to cover the costs of these services, relieving some of the financial pressure and resulting in a protected environment that promotes the health and well-being of the person and their family.

Social benefits have a positive effect, but it depends on how easy one can obtain and administer them. The application and approval process must be transparent and adapted to the individual's needs. Recipients must receive their benefits quickly and efficiently. Using digital tools can help to modernize social benefits and provide more transparency. However, it is just as important to have well-trained and human counsellors who can give the right information and support to claim and use the social benefits in the right way.

The integration in the labour market and the economic social participation of people with disabilities represent other areas of interest. The studies have shown that the access to a range of social benefits and incentives to support people with disabilities in their integration in the labour market will help them become independent and will reduce the need for public funding for their support and integration (Iftimoaei & Achiței, 2023). However, there are specific difficulties that these people encounter in order to find an appropriate job and also discriminatory practices in hiring or promotion that occur in the labour market. These findings emphasize the need for more efficient public policies meant to integrate and support people with disabilities in their economic activities.

Studies show that the social aspect is increased and more powerful when associated with personalised support services. An approach which focuses on the person as the main beneficiary of a service, giving him the opportunity to make decisions regarding his situation and needs, leads to real customized services. There are several studies proving that social benefits are not limited to cash and services that fight poverty; they are also an integral part of the social support system currently in place, a means of promoting and enabling people with disabilities to have greater independence and make decisions for themselves.

4. The Digitalization of Social Services

Digitalization of social services is important in the development of today's social welfare system. It will make it easier for people to get access to services and simplify administrative work. In a society with rapid technological development, institutions must adapt to the needs of the users. The process of digitization of social services simplifies procedures, reduces bureaucracy and provides a more transparent system for distribution of social assistance, helping people to get the help they need more quickly and easily.

Digitization facilitates access to social services. Through online platforms, citizens can easily apply for social benefits and monitor the processing of the cases.

Thus, people with disabilities are able to easily and efficiently access the services necessary for integrating and participating in public consultations. Moreover, online environments represent the perfect solution to diminish bureaucracy and to reduce the time spent waiting for a response. Thus, the exchange of data and documents between public institutions and non-governmental organizations facilitates the coordination of social interventions.

However, this also comes with many challenges. Despite advancements in technology, many people with severe disabilities are not able to use digital systems because they lack skills or equipment or Internet access, or are prevented from doing so by physical disabilities. Exclusion from the digital revolution can reinforce existing inequalities, by making it more difficult for people with disabilities to access the services they need. Procedures designed for the digital era need to be accessible to all. Digital procedures should take into account the different needs that users may have.

Programs for people with disabilities must become more accessible and user-friendly, incorporating greater use of technologies to support accessibility as well as personalized technical support. Moreover, policies and programs that educate on technology use and provide support to those who require it are necessary to support the vulnerable and ensure that they can effectively use technology.

Digitalization also changes the work of the social workers. Digitalization of routine tasks may clear time and make it possible to provide individualized interventions. On the other hand, an over-emphasis on technology may reduce the human dimension of the digital services and affect the relation between the professional and the service recipient of digitalization.

In order for digitalization to truly evolve in the social work field, it is necessary and fundamental that this process goes hand in hand with strengthening the empathetic dimension of the professional practice. As stated in literature, it is the relationship between the professional and the beneficiary that characterizes the effectiveness of interventions, and therefore, technology should be used as a support tool and not as a substitute for the human dimension that is so very important in social work.

An important aspect of the digitization process is that the information system of a public institution can integrate and interact with the information systems of other public institutions, through integrated databases, enabling data exchange automatically. This helps to reduce the administrative burdens of beneficiaries, preventing errors or unnecessary waits when applying and benefiting from social benefits. Thus, the digitization of social benefits also implies the efficiency and transparency of a system which puts at their core the needs of the beneficiaries, their monitoring and, implicitly, the assessment of the social policies' impact, which will highlight and facilitate the data and analyses useful for improving these policies.

Digitization of social services is a new mode of action in the field of social services. Thanks to digitization, social services can become more bureaucratic, yet, at the same time, become more individualized and efficient, and help bring about more effective social interventions. Digitization of social services is in line with the principles of modern social work. A fundamental assumption is that every human being is unique, and that people receiving assistance should be actively involved in the decision-making process.

We also need to highlight the significance of digital skills for service recipients and professionals in the social sector. The effective exploitation of technology to fight digital exclusion requires the possession of digital skills. For people with severe disabilities, access to training and technical assistance programs is essential for exploiting information and communication technologies to maximize autonomy.

But social workers will also need to utilise digital tools effectively and ethically as part of their new social work practice.

The digitization of social services should be implemented observing the ethical principles and the human right to dignity including the protection of personal data and the confidentiality of information. As the volume of managed data is increasingly growing, public institutions must ensure adequate and efficient security and transparency measures (Neamțu, 2011). This way, the trust of the people assisted by the social welfare services can be solid and genuine and technology can really make a difference for people with severe disabilities.

Digitization of social services offers big opportunities in improving accessibility and efficiency of the social services. However, it also poses challenges with regards to inclusion and accessibility. Technology integration into the social welfare system must be done in a prudent and balanced manner, combining the benefits of technology with a beneficiary-oriented approach and empathy.

5. Empathy in the Process of Providing Social Benefits

Empathy is crucial when creating solutions for social benefits for people with severe disabilities. Although technology can be used to simplify and optimise processes for registration and access to benefits, it is the human touch that makes all the difference. We design solutions to social benefits that fit between the lines of technology and really meet the needs of the person with disabilities.

Social work is not just a formal relationship between a worker and a person receiving assistance. It is about knowing people's real lives and problems. A social worker is responsible for ensuring that people receive the social benefits they are entitled to and explain the steps needed to receive a benefit. At the same time, the social worker acts as a mediator between service providers and those in need of a service. The social worker understands people, finds ways of communication, and responds to their needs.

The social worker also supports and counsels them. Empathy is a fundamental component of this role and is not limited to the personal qualities of the worker.

The humanistic approach of social work is essential to make people with disabilities feel safe and secure in order to build up trust in their work with them. Many people with severe disabilities have negative experiences because of stigmatisation, discrimination and social exclusion. A humanistic social work approach, therefore, is working on building up a relationship and finding out how to solve problems that are obstructing the person with a disability to live as independently and happily as possible.

Working with people's real needs requires a delicate situation assessment, service provision customised to individual circumstances, and even participation of the helped people in making decisions. Thus, what is often referred to as empathy – besides positive connotations of kindness – is above all expressed in real actions. It is about consulting the people receiving assistance, adjusting the social assistance to the changes in their needs, and holding an open and constructive conversation with them. In the context of social programs, this emotion turns out to be a crucial factor, ensuring that the public funding is effectively translated into people's real lives (Șerban, 2005).

Integrating empathy into the digitalisation of social services is crucial. While digital solutions like online applications and electronic case management can be implemented within a short timeframe, people with disabilities require support and assistance, including those with severe disabilities, who may struggle to use technology and need support and empathy in their process of claiming their right to benefits.

Empathy is a key component of delivering social services. Empathetic social workers build trustful relationships by appreciating and supporting people with disabilities. This perspective is an essential part of delivering effective support for people with severe disabilities, and can help to make best use of available resources to significantly improve the lives of people with disabilities.

Empathy also implies that social workers are able to identify and address problems not evident from the documents, problems that can affect the quality of life of the persons and families receiving assistance. This close relationship, based on understanding and respect, enables social workers to monitor the specific needs arising suddenly, develop relevant interventions and monitor the flexibility of the social assistance system in a more effective manner, the responses received bearing testimony to the quality of intervention and the overall satisfaction of those benefiting from the social protection system's interventions.

Integrating digitalization and empathy in social assistance is a challenging task. People with severe disabilities have difficulties using digital technologies. The risk of exclusion and unequal access to social benefits and cash entitlements is a major concern. In these situations, the social worker's role is no longer limited to the procedural tasks. They become digital mediators, performing support functions and explaining the

procedures to the beneficiaries, in order to ensure that they are able to benefit from digital services (Buzducea, 2021).

Continuing professional development in digital literacy and empathetic communication skills is a criteria of relevance and effectiveness for social service professionals. Iftimoaei & Achiței (2023) emphasize the professionals' need to use technology to ensure access to services offered within social protection programs and friendly governance, without sacrificing the warm and personal approach, relationship and empathy when communicating with service users. Counselling skills, the ability to identify and analyse human needs, and the adaptability in changing interventions in order for digitalization not to be an obstacle, but a support tool are essential skills in the current digital revolution.

Integrating empathy and digitalization represents a strategic option for the modernization and optimization of social services. Combining digital processes and supportive approach represent two vectors that together respond to the individual needs of people with severe disabilities, thus preventing the possibility of exclusion and promoting inclusivity. Integrating empathy and digitalization makes the social services system more operational, target-oriented. It is one of the pillars of the beneficiary-oriented social policies, aimed at creating and developing quality of life, putting at their disposal services and benefits suitable to their needs. This option is imperative in developing social services for people with severe disabilities and it is a means of making their lives more comfortable and easier to live.

6. Challenges and Prospects for Change

Despite the important achievements regarding social benefits for people with severe disabilities, in order to improve these benefits today there are still many problems to be solved. Among the main problems which prevent the benefits of people with severe disabilities being used effectively are an excessive bureaucratic burden, a lack of specialists, a digital divide, unequal access to services, and other issues. All of these problems support the need for future policies to incorporate the basic needs of people with disabilities while simultaneously striving to be effective administratively and sincerely caring for individuals with severe disabilities.

The complexity of procedures and bureaucracy create problems (e.g. forms to apply for social benefits are complicated and need many documents to be submitted for administrative checks). Additional problems are created for the people in need and their families. Processes are too complicated which hinders timely delivery of these much needed benefits. As a result, some people with severe disabilities lose access to some benefits that affect quality of life and make it very difficult for them to live normal lives while social benefits are the means to achieve that.

The lack of the right personnel with the appropriate professional training is also emerging as a major issue. People with very significant disabilities need social workers and other professionals with specific expertise. Those working with people with disabilities must have appropriate skills and knowledge, but also a high degree of empathy and be able to use technology appropriately. Ongoing training and opportunities for sharing best practices are key in ensuring that the quality of the services that are offered is adequate to meet the needs of the people using them.

This is a major challenge as the digitalisation of social services also poses the risk of technological exclusion for people with disabilities, in particular severely disabled people. Additional barriers for the use of digital offers and applications may be present for people with severe disabilities in rural areas with low incomes. To ensure social inclusion and to meet the aim of equity, appropriate measures must be developed to reduce the negative effects of the digital divide for these people and to grant access to social services. Digital divides and technological exclusion must be addressed in a way that promotes social inclusion and equity.

In order to face these new challenges and be up to the task, a series of strategies will be required that place the needs of the beneficiary at the centre: combining the potential of digital technology with the consideration of feelings and needs in order to support and strengthen the relationships between professionals and people with disabilities (Fond-Harmant *et al*., 2023). Social policies will have to set up support plans and ways to use technology with the aim of inclusion. All the platforms will have to be accessible to everyone. And above all, a channel of communication should always be open with the social worker in charge of each case, offering immediate answers to questions and issues that arise (Lazăr *et al*., 2020).

In order to conduct inclusive and empathetic digitalization, it is important to develop a user-friendly interface for all users, to provide individualized technical support, to organize training for beneficiaries, and to involve the community in the process of adaptation of social services for people with disabilities. Integrated policies also imply assessment of social services impact, detection of gaps, and prompt operational adjustments to meet ever-changing needs and interests of people with disabilities.

We face a range of challenges which can only be overcome by making both digital efficiency and a human touch a cornerstone of future development. The intelligent combination of technology, helpful policies and practices, and effective support for the needs of people with severe disabilities is the key to further improvements in the quality of life of these individuals. This will be the basis for the future development of the social benefits system, which must be efficient but also fair and inclusive for all.

7. Conclusions

Social benefits are important for people with severe disabilities as they enhance quality of life. Social benefits to people with disabilities promote their independence and integration in society and have the potential to prevent poverty. If social benefits are provided in the right way as part of an overall sound policy, they can make a major positive difference in the lives of people with severe disabilities. As a result, people with severe disabilities can lead fulfilling lives and be socially included.

Technology is not the only key factor to ensure effectiveness of social benefits. While it processes and provides quick access to services, is transparent and efficient, the most important is the human dimension, which is missing from many current systems. Social workers need to establish understanding and trust with the person for whom they are planning the right package of services, to understand their real needs and to tailor the offered services accordingly. The tools should support the social worker in his/her work and be used to increase quality of the given service, not to replace it.

The system of social welfare has its own set of problems. Firstly, bureaucracy is slow, secondly, there is a large gap in access to technology, and thirdly, there is a lack of specialists. Thus, the expected impact of the social benefits on people's lives is nil. But this also means that there is a great opportunity to implement innovative policies that combine technology with a personal approach, that fight against social inequalities and are universal and inclusive.

Based on the findings of this study, several essential areas for improving the social benefits system have been identified. Firstly, online platforms for registering and managing the social benefits for people with disabilities must be accessible. These online platforms must have adequate technical support for people with disabilities. Social workers who administer social benefits need ongoing training on how to effectively use technology and take an empathetic approach to helping people with disabilities. Improved collaboration among government agencies, social services, and nongovernmental organizations is necessary to provide unified, individualized support to people with disabilities. Secondly, ongoing monitoring and evaluation of programs and services, using data and the perspectives of beneficiaries, is necessary to adjust and improve the social benefits system. By continuously identifying the actual needs of the beneficiaries, social benefits and public services can be effectively organized to meet those needs.

We need robust social services, smart digitalization and lots of empathy – because all these elements together can significantly enrich the lives of people with severe disabilities. A balanced approach – efficient and effective for the needs of individuals with severe disabilities – is very important. It will help ensure efficient use of resources and social inclusion of these people. It will enable them to live more

independently, equally with others and thus become full members of society. Empathy and modern technology can save lives.

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CHAPTER 4. MENTAL HEALTH, TRAUMA & THERAPEUTIC INTERVENTIONS

Experiential Approach in Counselling and Therapy of Clients with a History of Sexual Abuse

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Abstract. *Childhood sexual trauma is a severe form of violence with profound impacts on emotional development, identity, and interpersonal relationships. The present study investigates how this trauma manifests itself in adulthood and highlights the role of the social worker in experiential therapeutic intervention. The aim of the research was to explore the effects of early trauma on emotional and relational functioning and the effectiveness of experiential techniques in counselling victims. The method used consisted of a qualitative case study, based on the analysis of the client's history, therapeutic observations, and the application of experiential techniques, including projective exercises, symbolic exploration, and present-centeredness. The results highlight that early trauma influenced the development of defence mechanisms, intimate relationships, and emotional regulation, and that experiential intervention facilitated accessing internal resources, restructuring the inner critic and integrating traumatic experiences into a coherent narrative. The study highlights the importance of the interdisciplinary skills of the social worker and the relevance of the experiential approach for strengthening the internal safety and personal competence of victims of sexual abuse.*

Keywords: *sexual abuse, risk factors, family, therapy, experiential approach, social work.*

1. Introduction

Childhood sexual trauma is one of the most serious forms of violence, exerting a profound impact on the emotional development, identity formation, and the ability to relate to the individual. From the perspective of social work and psychotherapy, effective intervention on this trauma requires an integrative approach, which takes into account both the personal dimension and the family and social contextual influences (Conte & Shore, 1982; Bagley & Ramsay, 1986; Kendall-Tackett, Williams & Finkelhor, 1993; Denov, 2004; Padgett, 2016). Social workers frequently encounter victims of sexual abuse, which requires not only the acquisition of interdisciplinary skills, but also the development of experience-centred therapeutic intervention skills to manage the emotional and social complexity of trauma and support the process of emotional

regulation and identity reconstruction (Pack, 2011; Martin, 2016). Scott (1998) highlights the complexity of social work intervention in cases of child abuse, showing that it is deeply influenced by the organizational context and procedural practices, which can restrict the depth of professional analysis. In such situations, the social worker carries out a therapeutic intervention, taking over the role of therapist, exploring the emotional and experiential universe of the client, identifying traumas, internal resources and coping mechanisms, and facilitating the process of integrating traumatic experiences into a coherent narrative. The role of the social worker as a therapist is also emphasized by Arbuckle (1967), who highlights the importance of his/her function in direct intervention with clients, emphasizing the ability to integrate the specific skills of social work with those of counsellors and psychologists, so as to ensure a holistic and collaborative approach in supporting individuals with complex needs. According to Alterkruse, Harris & Brandt (2001), the role of the professional counsellor includes interventions actively oriented towards personal development and resilience, which highlights the overlaps with the therapeutic role that the social worker can also have in psychosocial counselling practices. Agresta (2004) shows that school social workers and counsellors devote a substantial proportion of their professional time to counselling activities and are willing to allocate even more time to them, highlighting the importance of the psychosocial dimension in the role of the social worker in school. Conte & Shore (1982) present a comprehensive assessment of the role of social workers in addressing child sexual abuse, including practical responses, treatment models and clinical and legal implications of professional interventions.

Bagley & Ramsay (1986) argue that childhood sexual abuse results in complex psychosocial consequences that necessitate an integrated approach in social work practice, highlighting the importance of tailored interventions to address long-term emotional, behavioural, and social outcomes. Childhood sexual abuse has complex and multidimensional effects, including emotional and psychological disorders such as anxiety, depression, guilt and shame, behavioural manifestations of risk and self-injury, cognitive and academic difficulties such as concentration problems and thought distortions, as well as long-term consequences in adult life, including persistent mental disorders, difficulties in intimate and sexual relationships, and an increased risk of self-destructive behaviours, all of which are often exacerbated by loss of trust in adults and social isolation (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986; Conte & Schuerman, 1987; Caffaro-Rouget, Lang & Van Santen, 1989; Kendall-Tackett et al., 1993; Denov, 2004).

Experiential techniques, including symbolic expression of emotions, dramatization, and working with bodily sensations, allow victims to transform traumatic experiences into coherent narratives, develop an empathetic inner voice, and strengthen internal resources, demonstrating effectiveness in reducing symptoms of anxiety, depression, and relationship dysfunction, which makes experiential therapy an essential

tool in the psychosocial approach to sexual abuse (Beahrs & Humiston, 1974; Pascual-Leone & Greenberg, 2007). The experiential-integrative approach in the therapy of victims of sexual abuse focuses on the direct processing of traumatic experiences through expressive and symbolic techniques, combining cognitive, emotional and behavioural components to support emotional regulation, identity reconstruction and guilt reduction, thus providing a holistic therapeutic framework that facilitates the integration of traumatic experiences and the promotion of the client's internal resources (Martsolf & Draucker, 2005).

The experiential approach in the therapy of victims of sexual abuse has proven effective in facilitating the processing of repressed emotions, reducing guilt and reconstructing identity, providing a safe and inclusive framework for the integration of trauma into the personal narrative (Pascual-Leone & Greenberg, 2007; Pos, Greenberg & Elliott, 2008).

2. Research Design

The research is qualitative, exploratory and descriptive, based on the case study method, which allows for an in-depth analysis of the subjective experience of an adult victim of childhood sexual abuse, in their family, social and relational context. We used the case study, as an essential method in social work, because it allows for an in-depth exploration of individual experiences in their real social context, facilitating the understanding of complex processes, subjective meanings and the interaction between personal and structural factors (Fidel, 1984; Gilgun, 1994; Padgett, 2016).

2.1. Research Purpose

The research purpose is to explore the impact of childhood sexual trauma on emotional, identity and relational development in adulthood, as well as to analyse the role of experiential psychotherapy in the process of awareness, emotional regulation and integration of traumatic experiences, through a case study.

2.2. Research Objectives

General Objective

Analysing how early sexual trauma, in the context of a disorganized family environment, influences the emotional and relational functioning of a young adult and identifying the adaptation mechanisms and resources activated within the psychotherapeutic process.

Specific Objectives:

1. Identifying individual, family and social risk factors involved in the emergence and maintenance of sexual trauma.

2. Exploring the emotional, cognitive, behavioural and somatic manifestations associated with childhood sexual trauma.
3. Analysing the defence mechanisms developed in response to early traumatic experiences.
4. Investigating the impact of trauma on attachment, intimacy, and interpersonal relationships in adulthood.
5. Identifying internal and external resources activated in the healing process.
6. Analysing the contribution of experiential psychotherapy to reducing traumatic symptomatology and building a coherent self-narrative.

Research Questions:

1. How does childhood sexual trauma manifest itself in the emotional and relational life of the client in adulthood?
2. What are the family and social factors that contributed to the vulnerability and maintenance of the trauma?
3. What defence mechanisms were developed in response to early traumatic experiences?
4. How does trauma influence the capacity for emotional regulation and intimate relationships?
5. What internal and external resources are activated within the psychotherapeutic process?
6. What is the role of experiential psychotherapy in the process of integrating sexual trauma?

Research Hypotheses (Formulated Qualitatively):

1. It is assumed that childhood sexual trauma, in the context of an insecure attachment, negatively influences emotional and relational functioning in adulthood.
2. It is considered that repeated exposure to abuse and lack of emotional support lead to the development of maladaptive defence mechanisms.
3. Trauma reactivation is assumed to be triggered by emotional and sensory stimuli associated with early traumatic experiences.
4. A safe therapeutic relationship is anticipated to facilitate accessing internal resources and integrating traumatic experiences.
5. Experiential psychotherapy is believed to contribute to restructuring self-image and strengthening the sense of internal safety.

Data Collection Methods and Techniques:

- Case study analysis;
- Clinical observation;
- Clinical and narrative interview;

- Analysis of expressive materials (drawings, symbolic exercises);
- Therapeutic reflection and process notes.

Ethical Considerations

The case study is conducted with the informed consent of the client, respecting fundamental ethical principles: confidentiality, anonymity, protection of identity, respect for the dignity and integrity of the person. The data are used exclusively for academic and research purposes.

Relevance of the Research

This research contributes to understanding the complexity of childhood sexual trauma and highlights the importance of an integrated, experiential and relational approach in psychotherapeutic intervention, with relevant implications for the field of clinical psychology and social work.

3. Case Description

I. is 25 years old and has been living abroad with her partner for 8 months. There are dissatisfactions in the relationship related to intimacy and affectivity. She was born in a city in Romania, being the second of six children. The father is an alcoholic, and the mother is diagnosed with epilepsy and is disabled. The mother was emotionally unavailable throughout the client's childhood and adolescence. The family environment was marked by verbal, emotional and sexual abuse. As a child, she witnessed an attempted sexual abuse of her sister. She was also the victim of sexual abuse by her uncle (mother's brother). She remained silent until adolescence.

Education was marked by bullying and integration difficulties, and adolescence was marked by drug use and self-harm (cutting). After 18 years, he managed to quit substance use with the help of a partner. He stabilized by working and living independently.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model provides a comprehensive framework for assessing and describing the multiple environments that influence the experiences of victims of sexual abuse, allowing for the identification of interactions between family, school, peer group, and cultural context, as well as highlighting risk factors and protective resources (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Conte & Shore, 1982) (Table 1).

Capacity for introspection and reflection; active participation in experiential therapy; emotional regulation techniques; support from partner and close friends; development of an empathetic inner voice.

Experienced events and manifestations of trauma:

- Early sexual trauma manifested itself through;
- Anxiety and fear of rejection in relationships;
- Sensitivity to conflicts and emotional withdrawal;

- Nocturnal physiological reactions (sleep talking, startle) associated with trauma activation;
- Feelings of guilt related to sister abuse;
- Increased inner criticism, shame and decreased self-esteem;
- Self-aggression in adolescence as an emotional regulation mechanism.

Table 1. Ecological model of the case (after Bronfenbrenner, 1979)

Systemic level	Factors. Specific elements	Concrete examples
Microsystem	Direct experiences and the victim's immediate environment	Sexual abuse by uncle; witnessing attempted abuse of sister; bullying; substance use; self-harm; difficulties in adult intimate relationships
Mesosystem	Interactions between close systems (family-school, family-friends)	Tense family-school relationships; harmful peer group; criticized or abusive siblings and parents; lack of family and social support
Macrosystem	Cultural norms, values and legislation	Traditional culture regarding children's obedience to parents; taboos regarding sexuality; traditional roles of women; child protection legislation
Exosystem	Institutions and contexts that indirectly influence the child's life	Lack of effective intervention by protective services; school with bullying; limited access to psychological counselling; community without supportive role models

Currently, trauma is reactivated through "triggers" from the current environment: gestures, vocal tones, smells, behaviours that evoke emotions and sensations from the past. Has difficulty expressing needs and defining oneself in relationships, sometimes manifesting disproportionately intense emotional reactions.

Activated resources:

- Capacity for introspection and personal reflection;
- Partial emotional stability through the current relationship and the support of close friends (social support);
- Use of anchoring techniques in the present for emotional regulation;
- Awareness and restructuring of the inner critical voice;

- Activation of positive affective memory and building a consolidated self-image;
- These resources support constant involvement in the therapeutic process and the gradual development of trust in the relationship with the therapist.

Trauma: Characteristics and Impact

Early sexual trauma significantly shaped emotional and relational development.

- Dysfunctional family history, lack of a secure base and exposure to abuse affected the formation of a secure attachment, which is subsequently reflected in difficulties in emotional regulation and in intimate relationships;
- Formation of defence mechanisms: repression, avoidance, hypervigilance;
- Associated risks: trauma reactivation, self-isolation, avoidance behaviours, difficulties in intimate and family relationships;
- Main risk factors: lack of secure attachment, repeated abuse, parental dysfunction, parental alcohol consumption, absence of emotional support, exposure to bullying in the school environment.

Psychotherapeutic Intervention:

The intervention was carried out within the framework of Experiential Psychotherapy, based on authentic contact, expression of emotions and transformation of experiences through symbolization and integration.

This case study is carried out with the informed consent of the client, in a framework that respects the confidentiality, dignity and integrity of the therapeutic process

Therapeutic Objectives:

1. Identification and awareness of emotional and behavioural triggers;
2. Strengthening internal resources and a sense of personal competence;
3. Awareness and restructuring of the inner critic;
4. Reconstruction of personal boundaries and internal safety;
5. Exploration of traumatic experiences through symbolic and expressive processes, aiming to reduce the associated emotional intensity and integrate them into a coherent narrative.

Techniques Used:

- Associative exploration between the present and the past through symbolic and expressive processes;
- Anchoring in the present and working with bodily sensations;
- Projective exercises: drawing the critical voice in the form of a snail, a tree of resources;
- Exercises for reflection on the inner critic and dialogue with the authentic self;

- Transformation of negative internal statements into positive and realistic statements;
- Expressing emotions through words, images and movement;
- Activating positive affective memories to strengthen identity.

The psychotherapeutic process is ongoing, and the interventions aim to strengthen internal resources, create a sense of safety and re-signify traumas in a supportive and secure environment. Interdisciplinary collaboration with social workers provides an extensive support framework, contributing to the client's emotional and social stability.

4. Discussion

During the experiential intervention, the client was involved in working techniques designed to facilitate both trauma awareness and the development of internal resources. By exploring the associative relationship between the present and the past through symbolic and expressive processes, she was able to identify and become aware of emotional stimuli and triggering situations associated with early traumatic experiences. Anchoring in the present and awareness of bodily sensations supported emotional regulation, reducing the intensity of physiological reactions and increasing the sense of internal safety. Through projective exercises, such as drawing the critical voice in the form of a snail and building a "resource tree," the client began to notice internal criticism and contrast it with personal resources, contributing to the awareness and restructuring of the inner critic and to the strengthening of the feeling of personal competence.

Techniques of reflection on the inner dialogue and the transformation of negative affirmations into positive and realistic affirmations facilitated the development of a more empathetic and functional inner voice, supporting the reconstruction of personal boundaries and internal safety. In parallel, the expression of emotions through word, image and movement, together with the activation of positive affective memories, allowed the gradual integration of traumatic experiences into a coherent narrative, reducing the associated emotional intensity and strengthening identity and the feeling of autonomy. The client's response was positive, demonstrating continued engagement, reflective capacity, and a gradual increase in emotional control, indicating the effectiveness of the intervention in achieving the proposed therapeutic goals (Martsolf & Draucker, 2005; Pascual-Leone & Greenberg, 2007; Pos, Greenberg, & Elliott, 2008).

The case study highlights how the initial hypotheses are supported by clinical data and therapeutic interventions. First, the traumatic experience, in the context of an insecure attachment, had a significant impact on emotional and relational functioning in adulthood, manifesting itself through anxiety, fear of rejection, sensitivity to conflict, and difficulties in expressing needs in intimate relationships. This supports the

hypothesis that early traumatic experiences, combined with the lack of a secure base, negatively shape emotional and relational development (Conte & Shore, 1982; Bagley & Ramsay, 1986).

Second, repeated exposure to abuse and the lack of emotional support from the family and social environment contribute to the development of maladaptive defence mechanisms, such as emotional repression, avoidance, hypervigilance, and self-aggression in adolescence. This confirms the hypothesis regarding the link between repeated trauma, lack of support, and maladaptive coping strategies (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986; Kendall-Tackett, Williams & Finkelhor, 1993). Data also highlight that trauma reactivation is triggered by emotional and sensory stimuli associated with early traumatic experiences, such as vocal tones, gestures, behaviours, or smells that evoke the traumatic past. The hypothesis regarding the triggering of emotional and physiological reactions through specific "triggers" is validated, revealing the importance of present-centred and emotional regulation interventions (Pascual-Leone & Greenberg, 2007; Pos, Greenberg & Elliott, 2008).

Furthermore, the case study confirms that a secure therapeutic relationship facilitates accessing internal resources and integrating traumatic experiences. By actively involving the client in the therapeutic process and by creating a safe and inclusive framework, she was able to mobilize her personal resources, identify and restructure her inner criticism, and develop a sense of competence and emotional control. Therefore, the hypothesis regarding the central role of the therapeutic relationship as a protective factor and facilitator of healing was confirmed (Pack, 2011; Martin, 2016).

Finally, experiential psychotherapy has proven effective in restructuring self-image and strengthening the sense of internal security. The techniques used, such as associative exploration between past and present, projective exercises, transforming negative statements into positive statements and activating positive affective memories, contributed to the integration of traumatic experiences into a coherent narrative and the development of an empathetic and functional inner voice. The experiential approach facilitates emotional regulation and identity reconstruction following sexual trauma (Martsolf & Draucker, 2005; Pos, Greenberg & Elliott, 2008).

Thus, the case analysis emphasizes the interdependence between individual factors, traumatic experiences and the socio-family environment, demonstrating the effectiveness of therapeutic interventions focused on experience and relationship in promoting healing and the development of internal resources in victims of sexual abuse.

5. Conclusions

The case highlights the complex impact of sexual trauma on adult life and the importance of psychotherapeutic intervention centred on experience, safety and

relationship. The experiential process allowed the client to access and express her emotions, develop an empathetic inner voice and gradually integrate the traumatic fragments into a coherent and healing story.

The case highlights the importance of an intervention based on empathy, authentic contact and symbolization, in which the therapist becomes an active witness and facilitator of the reconstruction of the self. Healing does not involve erasing the past, but transforming it into a source of understanding, strength and personal responsibility. The analysis of this case study confirms the complexity of the impact that early sexual trauma has on the emotional, identity and relational development of the victim, highlighting how dysfunctional family experiences, lack of emotional support and repeated exposure to abuse contribute to the formation of maladaptive defence mechanisms. Harmful peer interactions, school difficulties and subsequent substance use increase psychosocial vulnerability, and reactions to sensory and emotional stimuli highlight how early traumatic experiences can be reactivated in adult life. The study also highlights the effectiveness of experiential psychotherapy, which, through symbolic exploration of the past and present, projective exercises, anchoring in the body and transformation of inner criticism, allows the victim to access internal resources, integrate traumatic experiences into a coherent narrative and gradually rebuild a sense of safety and personal competence. The results confirm that a safe and inclusive therapeutic relationship is an essential factor in the healing process, but also highlight the need for social workers to develop interdisciplinary skills and in-depth knowledge of specific therapeutic intervention techniques, in order to effectively respond to the complexity of sexual trauma and the individual needs of victims. Thus, the case highlights not only the link between early trauma and adult functioning, but also the importance of integrating psychological, social, and clinical knowledge into social work practice, strengthening the argument for an interdisciplinary and personalized approach to therapeutic intervention.

Acknowledgement

In the preparation of this paper, the authors have used the ChatGPT artificial intelligence model (version 5.2) exclusively for the purpose of refining and finishing the expression of the text. The scientific content, argumentative structure and interpretations presented belong entirely to the authors. All suggestions generated by the AI have been critically analysed, verified and validated by the authors, who assume full responsibility for the accuracy, originality and integrity of the works.

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Reconnection and Resilience: Interdisciplinary and Community Collaboration in Addressing Institutionalized Children's Trauma

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Abstract. *Institutionalized children often face deep and complex trauma caused by disrupted attachment, neglect, abuse, and emotional instability. Healing these wounds requires more than individual professional intervention; it calls for a relational and community-based approach grounded in interdisciplinary collaboration and shared responsibility. This paper examines how networks of professionals – social workers, psychologists, educators, counsellors, healthcare providers and NGOs – can foster reconnection and resilience among children in the child protection system. Drawing on relational trauma and attachment theories, the analysis highlights the role of empathy, intersectoral cooperation, and community solidarity in promoting recovery. Systemic challenges such as fragmented services, limited human resources, and insufficient specialized training are addressed, alongside examples of good practices demonstrating that reconnection and resilience can be nurtured through coordinated, sustainable interventions. The paper concludes that only through genuine partnership between professionals and the community can real and lasting healing be achieved for institutionalized children – healing that ultimately rests on a relational ethic grounded in shared responsibility and solidarity, and which supports personalized, child-centred care.*

Keywords: *reconnection, resilience, trauma, institutionalized children, adolescence, interdisciplinary collaboration, community.*

1. Introduction

One of the most vulnerable social groups today is children in the social welfare system. They are separated from their families at an early age because of abandonment, neglect, or other adverse circumstances. As a result of these traumas, institutionalized children are marked by deep wounds that fundamentally shape both their identity and their capacity to develop social relationships. It is precisely the lack of stable attachment that will trigger, in many cases, complex relational trauma with a wide spectrum of manifestations: emotional dysregulation, attachment disorders, and precariousness in forming trusting relationships with others (van der Kolk, 2014).

Unlike trauma caused by a single event, complex trauma is triggered by a continuum of neglect and unstable relationships (Herman, 1992). Although current forms of intervention in social institutions tend to focus on individual therapy and the management of each case separately – approaches that are, in fact, necessary – they are not enough to address the deeply relational nature of trauma. The healing resolution of

trauma does not occur in a vacuum, in isolation, as healing requires secure, consistent relationships governed by feelings of safety and trust. From this perspective, social support becomes essential in the recovery process.

This paper aims to analyse precisely the process of relational reconnection and the development of resilience in individuals within the social protection system, through the collaborative symbiosis of interdisciplinary professional networks within the community. The analysis is grounded in the attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982; Ainsworth, 1989) and relational trauma theory (van der Kolk, 2014; Siegel, 2020), and identifies major systemic challenges: fragmented services, systemic underfunding, and limited professional training, while also offering relationship- and community-based responses. The central thesis emphasizes that resilience is not a fixed attribute of the individual but rather the result of interpersonal connections and collective care systems. Through genuine, close interdisciplinary collaboration, within the context of real social solidarity, institutionalized children will be able to rebuild their trust, sense of belonging, and hope.

2. Attachment, Trauma, and Development

2.1. Attachment Theory

According to Attachment Theory, early caregiving relationships establish internal working models that will influence emotional and social functioning throughout life (Bowlby, 1982). If care is available and consistent during the early years of life, children will internalize a sense of security and predictability. But, if primary care is inconsistent, abusive, or entirely absent, children will develop future patterns rooted in anxiety and withdrawal.

Since children in institutionalized settings are constantly subjected to a periodic turnover of the people they come into contact with (caregivers), this affects their capacity for attachment and care becomes more routine than relational. According to longitudinal studies conducted on children raised in institutions in Romania, significant delays in cognitive and emotional development were highlighted, even after subsequent placement in family-based care (Humphreys *et al.*, 2020; Nelson, Zeanah & Fox, 2019). In conclusion, these findings demonstrate that the lack of attachment cannot be compensated for by one-off interventions alone – the child needs consistent and emotionally attuned relationships. Moreover, institutionalization affects not only behaviour, but also the neurobiological basis of resilience, including stress regulation systems and affect-congruent integration (Schore, 2019).

2.2. Complex Trauma and Relational Trauma

Chronic threats and contexts of vulnerability are the triggering factors in which complex trauma arises. This type of trauma does not arise as a result of an isolated event, but involves a chronic amalgam of painful experiences, such as neglect, emotional abuse, and relational absence, all of which profoundly affect the child's subsequent development. The individual's inner world will be severely disrupted by complex trauma, and their self-image, perception of the world, and ability to form healthy relationships will be significantly impaired.

Relational trauma specifically disrupts the child's ability to trust others and regulate their emotions in close relationships. Instead of relationships generating security and emotional regulation, they become sources of insecurity or even fear. Unfortunately, as a result of the constant precariousness of relationships in institutional settings, the child observes the unpredictability or even unavailability of caregivers, which triggers problems with emotional self-regulation.

In such settings, frequent changes in caregiving staff, procedural rigidity, and even emotional detachment rooted in professional distance amplify relational trauma, so that children may exhibit anxiety, impulsivity, or even the opposite: inhibitory withdrawal (van der Kolk, 2014; Cook *et al*., 2017). In this context, the key to healing trauma is not found in technical or cognitive intervention, but rather involves establishing corrective relational experiences. Therefore, stable relationships with responsive, empathetic, predictable, and engaged adults become essential in reshaping the harmful patterns accumulated over time. The relational process requires, on the one hand, time, but also authentic and adaptable interaction tailored to the child's needs so that they can take the necessary steps toward healing. Thus, effective interventions for complex trauma aim not only to reduce symptoms, but also to strengthen appropriate relational patterns. These interventions focused on attachment, trauma, and relationships will develop secure and functional internal models when the child encounters not just techniques, but people with whom they can safely and empathetically connect.

3. Reconnection and Resilience: Conceptual Foundations

3.1. Reconnection

Reconnection is the path through which individuals who have experienced trauma begin, step by step, to open up to others again and to engage emotionally and socially in relationships. Following a deprivation of stable, secure, and empathetic bonds, internal recalibration will be neither simple nor instantaneous. The path to healing requires, on the one hand, an inner willingness – the courage to trust again – and, on the other hand, the presence of people who offer safety, availability, and stability (Siegel, 2020).

Reconnection is a slow process that develops over time through repeated relational experiences in which the child feels accepted, understood, and protected. Children who have experienced trauma may react impulsively during the reconnection process or, conversely, may develop inhibitory reactions. These behaviours do not always indicate a lack of interest, but rather an attempt to verify whether the relationship is truly secure. The mature, consistent, and empathetically responsive behaviour of the adult is essential, as through this response, the child will understand that they are in a secure relationship that does not fluctuate based on their momentary behaviour.

Over time, through such interactions, positive relational experiences are formed that contribute to rebuilding trust. These experiences help the child recalibrate how they relate to others and to themselves, facilitating the development of more stable and healthier relationships. Thus, reconnection becomes not only a process of drawing closer to others, but also an essential step in the deep healing of trauma.

3.2. Resilience

In the past, resilience was considered a characteristic of strong people who possess special inner resources through which they can overcome adversity. Such a conception focused exclusively on the individual and did not take into account the context of life. Currently, resilience is viewed in a more complex manner, as a process through which the child develops in relation to the environment in which they live (Ungar, 2021). Thus, the focus is not only on what the child possesses internally, but also on what the external environment offers. The child does not become resilient through isolation from the environment, but precisely through the experiences that help and encourage them to cope with an adaptive environment.

For children in institutionalized settings, this does not happen on its own, but becomes possible when there is real and constant support around them: secure relationships, a supportive school environment, and access to adequate health services (Masten, 2021). For example, an integrated school setting that consistently assesses the child's progress or regression will foster a sense of competence.

In this context, reconnection plays an essential role. Every positive and stable relationship offers the child a new experience that gradually strengthens their ability to cope with difficulties. Thus, resilience is built step by step through interactions that provide safety, trust, and meaning, subsequently facilitating healthier and more stable social integration. Throughout this process, every appropriate relationship and every well-calibrated experience will add a new building block to the establishment of a healthy inner foundation.

3.3. The Interaction Between Reconnection and Resilience

Reconnection helps the child regain trust in the people they interact with, and this trust is essential both for the learning process and for the ability to manage their emotions. When a child begins to feel that they can count on others, they become more open, more engaged, and better able to regulate their reactions in different situations.

In turn, resilience provides the inner resources that help the child stay connected to people around them and cope with stress without withdrawing or feeling overwhelmed. The two processes support each other: secure relationships build resilience, and resilience allows relationships to be maintained even in difficult contexts.

For these processes to develop, a balance between structure and empathy is needed. Children need clear boundaries and predictability, but also understanding and warmth – emotion. This combination provides them with stability without rigid constraints, creating a space where they can grow safely.

Therefore, interventions should not be isolated or fragmented. It is important for institutions, professionals, and the community to collaborate and provide consistent support. When messages and approaches are aligned, the child experiences continuity and safety, which truly supports the healing and development process.

4. Interdisciplinary Collaboration in Child Protection

4.1. The coordinating role of social work

Social workers hold a central position in child protection systems. Their role includes assessment, case coordination, and mediation between children, families, and institutions (Payne, 2021). Child protection is essentially a very broad, complex field that cannot be encapsulated within a single profession.

Social workers are vital in the connection they establish with children, families, and the institutions involved. In assessing the risks of the situations faced by the children they work with, they observe not only material or administrative gaps but also relational and emotional ones. That is why trauma-informed social work practice recognizes that behavioural problems often mask survival adaptations. Thus, forms of defiance and inhibition are no longer categorized as isolated behavioural problems, but as adaptive reactions developed over time. For example, the social worker will be able to observe how aggression or, conversely, withdrawal are nothing more than the child's reactive responses to an unsafe environment.

Moreover, the social worker becomes the key figure in coordinating the interdisciplinary team to follow a unified approach in addressing the trauma. They can provide others with a contextual perspective on the child's background to identify pathways for support.

4.2. Psychologists and Counsellors as Facilitators of Emotional Safety

Within the joint team working to heal the trauma of children deprived of early attachment, psychologists and counsellors play a crucial role in supporting the emotional well-being of the children. They possess a whole arsenal of procedures through which they can support children, such as trauma-focused cognitive-behavioural therapy (TF-CBT), play therapy, and attachment-focused interventions (Cloitre *et al*., 2020). All of these scientifically validated therapeutic frameworks ultimately aim to foster internal emotional regulation mechanisms.

The impact of psychologists and counsellors extends beyond therapies for children in need, as they can support the training of staff caring for those affected by trauma. They can provide training sessions to help identify the triggers of intense reactions. At the same time, psychologists can train care staff to develop skills in de-escalating conflicts and managing difficult behaviours in an empathetic and non-punitive manner.

Another area of collaboration could be ongoing training programs between psychologists and educators, with the immediate result of aligning terminology and standardizing intervention procedures.

4.3. Role of Educators and of the School in the Healing Process

School plays a crucial role in the development of children from environments with attachment disorders. This setting can become a safe and stable space in the lives of traumatized children, providing the continuity that the child welfare system does not always manage to ensure. However, it is vital that teachers are trained and equipped to understand the trauma in children's lives; otherwise, the children's reactions will be misinterpreted. When teachers understand the impact of trauma and adapt their approach, challenging behaviours are no longer seen as acts of defiance, but as ways in which the child is trying to communicate what they are feeling.

In an environment where the child feels emotionally safe and is treated with patience and respect, discipline is no longer based on control but on relationship. Thus, the child begins to develop a sense of belonging and confidence in their own abilities. Furthermore, when the school collaborates with child protection services, academic progress is not viewed solely as academic performance, but as part of a broader process of healing and development.

4.4. Healthcare Professionals and Non-Governmental Organizations

In child protection, medical and community factors must not be overlooked. It must be understood that trauma does not manifest exclusively at the emotional and/or behavioural level, but also impacts the body's biological functions. Health professionals address the psychosomatic dimensions of trauma. For example, chronic stress alters

immune function, sleep regulation, and overall well-being. Therefore, it would not be surprising for those who have gone through traumatic experiences to experience abdominal pain, headaches, or increased susceptibility to recurrent illnesses. Paediatricians, nurses, and occupational therapists can monitor and manage these consequences. Furthermore, healthcare professionals are encouraged to consider all these symptoms within a broader context, in relation to the child's emotional history.

In parallel with medical services, non-governmental organizations can provide extensive support to the work of the aforementioned professionals. Often, they can respond more quickly and in a more personalized manner to various situations. Through mentoring programs, extracurricular activities, and post-institutional support, these organizations can develop meaningful, personalized relationships with each individual.

Not to be overlooked, faith communities and Christian churches, through their ethos, can support children affected by complex trauma through programs and spiritual resources that heal their wounds. In collaboration with state institutions, faith communities can become a space of belonging where the child feels valued and accepted – an aspect that should not be overlooked in rebuilding resilience. Through an ethos centred on love, acceptance, and care for one's neighbour, churches also offer spiritual resources that can support the healing process.

4.5. Obstacles to Cooperation

As one might expect, interdisciplinary collaboration is vital in healing the trauma of institutionalized children, yet this collaboration faces serious challenges. Among the greatest systemic barriers to collaboration are fragmented budgets, the rigidity of bureaucratic boundaries, and inadequate communication channels.

For example, budget fragmentation can limit the flexibility of interventions and may even lead to competition among institutions to secure resources. On the other hand, bureaucracy becomes a hindrance because each institution operates based on its own regulations and protocols, which sometimes do not align with those of other institutions when it comes to a specific intervention.

At the same time, there may be differences among professionals from different institutions regarding training, values, and even intervention methods. For example, a social worker may prioritize safety and the family environment, while a psychologist will emphasize emotional processing, and an educator will focus on academic performance.

That is why it is vital to have both procedural and visionary alignment among the institutions involved in the child's well-being. Without institutionalized protocols for cooperation – joint case meetings, integrated data systems, shared training – children can fall through the cracks in the system (Parton, 2014). There is therefore a need to

build ecosystems among all these institutions that foster mutual trust among their professionals.

5. Role of the Community in Healing

5.1. Institutional Limitations

As highlighted so far, healing does not occur in a vacuum nor through a single magical act. Although child protection agencies aim for the child's healing, there are inherent structural limitations. These limitations do not stem from a lack of professional commitment but are rooted in systemic gaps. Staff turnover is an example of a systemic factor that hinders the development of consistent and solid relationships in the life of a child marked by trauma. At the same time, the strict and standardized rules required in institutionalized settings can hinder the personalization of healing for each individual.

In this regard, local communities can step in as an additional factor in guiding the path toward relational healing. Various associations, faith-based communities, and volunteer networks can provide more flexible frameworks focused on relationships and belonging – vital factors in systemic inner transformation. For institutionalized children approaching adolescence or leaving the system, community involvement makes the difference between integration and marginalization. Relational continuity – individuals or groups offering emotional and practical support during the transition to independent living – is particularly beneficial (Gilligan, 2019).

5.2. Models of Good Practice

It should be noted that in recent years, Europe has been moving toward deinstitutionalization as a result of the harmful effects observed. Thus, the process underway involves a shift from large, impersonal centres to family-style homes with clear community involvement. In these settings, children benefit from closer, more consistent relationships and individualized attention – elements that are, in fact, essential for healthy development.

Organizations such as *Hope and Homes for Children in Romania* or *SOS Children's Villages* demonstrate how holistic, community-based care can foster healthier attachment.

Family-based care models and mentoring programs reduce behavioural and emotional problems and improve educational outcomes (*BCN Newsletter: June-July 2021*, 2021; *Psychologies Romania*, 2023). Moreover, children who benefit from such interventions have a greater chance of social integration and adaptation to adult life.

These examples underscore the importance of community involvement and collaboration between governmental and nongovernmental institutions. Best practice models emphasize interventions centred on relationships and belonging, vital factors in ontological inner transformation.

6. Systemic Challenges and Structural Reform

6.1. Fragmentation of Services

One of the most damaging and persistent systemic challenges is the fragmentation of services. When agencies work in isolation, without protocols or mechanisms for collaboration, those who suffer directly are the very people who need help – children in need. The lack of coherent collaboration entails various consequences, such as repetitive experiences, multiple assessments of the same situation, etc. A telling example is when professionals from different agencies, without information sharing between institutions, may repeatedly subject the child to similar or identical assessments, which leads to emotional exhaustion or a lack of interest on the child's part.

Furthermore, inconsistent case management can lead to constant, exhausting changes in intervention. The primary beneficiary – the child – thus receives conflicting messages, and this inconsistency will undermine trust in the system and, by extension, in the adults who are supposed to provide support.

The lack of unified data that would allow for rapid access to relevant information about the child causes each institution to do extra work and operate based on its own data. Likewise, frequent changes in public and institutional policies will generate reactive interventions lacking continuity and a unified goal. Beyond all these seemingly bureaucratic obstacles, such fragmentation re-traumatizes children by reinforcing unpredictability (Gilligan, 2019). Thus, the system that should have provided protection risks being perceived by the child as a source of vulnerability.

6.2. Human Resource Shortages and Burnout

The reality is that any system depends on human presence, and regardless of its vulnerabilities, the human factor can compensate for any shortfall. However, the effective functioning of protection systems is undermined by a shortage of human resources, coupled with the professional burnout of the few staff members remaining in the system.

Chronic underfunding of protection systems makes it difficult to attract specialists, and those remaining in the system are forced to manage an ever-increasing number of cases, within limited time and with scarce resources. This constant pressure affects not only the effectiveness of interventions but also the emotional well-being of the professionals involved. Emotional burnout, as well as associated phenomena such as secondary traumatic stress or compassion fatigue, undermine the professionals' ability to build and maintain quality relationships with children. In a field where the relationship is the primary tool of intervention, a decline in empathy, patience, or emotional availability profoundly affects the healing process (Newell & MacNeil, 2011). Thus, not only the quantity, but also the quality of services is compromised.

At the same time, ongoing professional development becomes vital in the context of institutionalized settings. In this context, continuing professional education becomes essential. Ongoing training in areas such as trauma-informed intervention, emotional regulation, or occupational stress management contributes to the development of competencies and the strengthening of staff resilience. Equally important are spaces for reflective supervision, where professionals can analyse difficult experiences, receive support, and prevent the buildup of emotional tension. These settings offer not only professional guidance, but also a space for psychological processing and balance.

7. A Model of Relational Ethics in Care

7.1. From Procedure to Presence

In contemporary times, efficiency often translates into meeting performance indicators. This goal is automatically carried over into modern care systems by deprioritizing relational quality in favour of achieving performance indicators (Noddings, 2013). Although standardization is necessary for organizational functioning, the risk is that care will be reduced to a mechanical matter through the fulfilment of procedures. Through this interventionist lens, the child is perceived as a depersonalized service recipient, overlooking the fact that they are a person with unique needs and emotions.

Therefore, relational ethics does not neglect procedural factors, but emphasizes presence rather than just intervention. A relational ethics prioritizes the child's experience of being truly seen and valued. Professionals must cultivate empathic presence – the ability to attune emotionally while maintaining professional boundaries. Such an ethical practice does not exclude the standardized framework within which interventions take place, but rather rehumanizes it. Specifically, rules are complemented by authentic relationships, and the child will come to feel that they are not an object to whom services are provided, but a person whom someone cares about. This step is essential in the healing process.

7.2. Shared Responsibility and Solidarity

It is counterproductive to view the healing of complex trauma in the life of an institutionalized child through the lens of technical or professional approaches. The healing process is based on the awareness that the path to liberation is a profoundly moral and civic one, as societies that ignore vulnerable children perpetuate forms of structural violence.

In this sense, reshaping social solidarity becomes a crucial step on the path to healing. Shared responsibility for vulnerable children is not primarily a form of charity, but a manifestation of social justice, as it provides equitable conditions for the development and well-being of all children. Shared solidarity thus requires a

commitment from all community members and the active involvement of all social actors.

When community members act as extended caregivers – through mentoring and inclusion – they contribute to what can be called collective resilience (Kirmayer *et al*., 2011). The way forward lies not only in the development of institutions, although this is important, but also in the cultivation of a shared social ethos of care. Society is therefore called upon to develop a consciousness oriented toward inclusion, responsibility, and love for one's neighbour. Within such a broader framework, healing can be achieved in a holistic and sustainable manner.

8. Conclusions

Children in foster care are marked by deep wounds stemming from problematic attachment and complex trauma. Healing these wounds requires interventions on multiple levels: psychological, relational, and systemic. This paper has argued that reconnection and resilience are best fostered within interdisciplinary networks and community ecosystems that prioritize empathy, collaboration, and shared responsibility.

Drawing on theories of attachment and relational trauma, the analysis emphasizes that resilience is built relationally – through trust, safety, and the creation of meaning. Interdisciplinary cooperation among psychologists, social workers, educators, and nongovernmental organizations creates coherence across systems. Community involvement extends this healing network beyond professional boundaries, supporting emotional continuity.

Authentic progress, however, requires systemic reform: integrated policies, adequate human resources, and trauma-informed training across all sectors. Only when professionals, institutions, and communities engage in an authentic partnership can institutionalized children reclaim their sense of identity, belonging, and hope for the future.

At the core of deep healing, however, interventions must be grounded in a relational ethic that facilitates personalized interventions for each child. Such an intervention could accelerate the healing process if it were coupled with the creation of a broader environment of shared social responsibility in which the well-being of others is prioritized.

Acknowledgement

In the preparation of this paper, the authors have used the ChatGPT artificial intelligence model (version 5.2) exclusively for the purpose of refining and finishing the expression of the text and Deepl.com for the purpose of good English translation. The scientific content, argumentative structure and interpretations presented belong entirely to the authors. All suggestions generated by the AI have been critically analysed, verified

and validated by the authors, who assume full responsibility for the accuracy, originality and integrity of the works.

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CHAPTER 5. DIGITALIZATION, CYBERPSYCHOLOGY & TECHNOLOGY-RELATED INEQUALITIES

Cyberbullying in Adolescence: A Review of Prevalence, Associated Factors, and Prevention Approaches

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Abstract. *Cyberbullying of under- and up-to-tween and teenagers is also considered to be a public health issue targeting adolescents and beyond with significant implications for psychosocial health and well-being. Young people aged 13-17 are especially vulnerable because of their high levels of digital media use and ongoing psychological and emotional growth. Evidence indicates a link between involvement in cyberbullying, as victim, aggressor, and both, and emotional problems such as depression, anxiety, loneliness, and suicidal thinking. The aim was to synthesize recent science with a viewpoint of the time between 2015 and 2026 on the prevalence of cyberbullying in adolescents, important risk and protective factors, and effective prevention interventions in the spirit of human behavioural and ethical considerations. The methodology is a classical one based on systematic and cross-sectional studies published between 2015 and 2026 mainly following the PRISMA guidelines, and databases in public health, psychology, and education in cyber bullying adolescents were consulted. The main results indicate that approximately 13–57% of adolescents are victims of cyberbullying globally. Notable demographic and attitudinal risk factors include prior exposure to violence, low self-esteem, low quality of family interactions, high/low technology usage, and weak school climate.*

Keywords: *cyberbullying, adolescents, risk factors, prevention, digital ethics, mental health.*

1. Introduction

Cyberbullying is typically defined as intentional and aggressive behaviour that is perpetrated repeatedly through digital or electronic media with the intent to cause harm or discomfort to another person, most often among groups of adolescents (Zhu *et al*., 2021). It may include behaviours such as online harassment, insults, threats, spreading rumour, social exclusion, theft of identity, and sharing of personal images or personal information without consent (Ansary, 2020; Zhong *et al*., 2022).

Fostered by the uptake of social media and mobile technologies, cyberbullying has now become a global phenomenon with adolescents across the cultural and economic spectrum (Modecki *et al*, 2014; Zhu *et al*., 2021). Although cyberbullying also

has fundamental features in common with traditional bullying, including intent to harm, repetition and power imbalance, it also has additional unique features. It is not restricted to physical location or time, it can provide anonymity, and the spread of harmful content can happen quickly and widely, which can amplify victimization and prolong psychological distress (Ansary, 2020; Zhu *et al.*, 2021). Different from traditional bullying, harmful digital content can be accessed and redistributed, repeatedly compounding harm (Zhong *et al*., 2022). The toll on young people's mental health is clear, the bullied suffer more depression and anxiety, loneliness, low self-regard, behavioural issues and suicidal thought (Ansary, 2020 ; Zhu *et al*., 2021). Evidence from Europe and across the globe has shown that having been bullied cybernetically is strongly associated with exposure to violence, poor family environment and low social support leading to worse mental health outcomes (Modecki *et al*., 2014). We need a scientific approach here since the rate of bullying has increased globally after 2015 and the reported prevalence rates of experience of being bullied "range widely", that is almost entirely dependent upon how well the study was conceived/ conducted, the instruments used to measure cyberbullying victimization, and cultural differences across nations (Zhu *et al*., 2021). Research is also distinguished by discipline, making it even more difficult to formulate a clear preventative goal: public health, psychology, education, digital etiquette, and more (Ansary, 2020; Zhong *et al*., 2022).

The present review synthesizes recent human-centred and empirically based evidence on adolescent cyberbullying, incorporating findings reflecting the prevalence of cyberbullying, its mental health consequences, risk and protective factors, and interventions. We aim to inform the public about health, education, and ethical practice discourse around adolescent cyberbullying.

2. Methodology

2.1. Type of Review

This study employed a narrative analysis design without meta-analysis suitable for consolidating the disparate evidence on cyberbullying among adolescents. A narrative approach was selected because of the considerable variability across studies with respect to definitions, measurement instruments, period of recall, and methodological designs which constrain the feasibility and interpretability of quantitative collection (Zhu *et al*., 2021). This approach also allows for integrative interpretation of findings (public health, psychology, education and enveloping digital ethics perspectives) from public health, psychology, education, and digital ethics perspectives (Zhong *et al*., 2022).

2.2. Search Strategy

A search of major databases such as Web of Science, MDPI, Frontiers, and additional peer-reviewed literature pertinent to the fields of public health, social assistance, and psychology from the years 2015 to 2023 was conducted due to the rapid increase in adolescent digital media use and cyberbullying between 2015 and 2020 as highlighted in a literature review by Zhu et *al*. (2021), as well as the inflammatory nature of recent studies noted by Ansary (2020). Terms included cyberbullying, adolescents, online harassment, digital aggression, etc., and a review of the list of references of related reviews.

2.3. Inclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they:

- studied adolescents aged approximately 12 to 18 years;
- investigated "cyberbullying" victimization and/or perpetration;
- utilized quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method designs, including systematic and narrative analyses (Zhu *et al*., 2021) or designs (Kowalski *et al*., 2014).

Research reporting findings about mental health outcomes, risk and/or protective factors, digital citizenship, or prevention was included.

2.4. Exclusion Criteria

We excluded every study that:

- involved only subjects classified as adults or populations not composed mostly of adolescent participants;
- was composed of papers in the opinion of the authors (e.g. opinion pieces, editorials, commentaries, non-scientific publications);
- were not empirical or systematic (Ansary, 2020; Zhong *et al*., 2022).

3. Results / Literature Review

3.1. Prevalence of Cyberbullying in Adolescents

Cyberbullying is common amongst adolescents across studies; however, estimates vary considerably depending on definition, recall period, and instrument. In a global synthesis, conducted according to PRISMA, perpetrators were estimated between 6.0 and 46.3% and victims between 13.99 and 57.5%, with evidence suggesting overall an increase in prevalence since 2015 (Zhu *et al*., 2021). Variation from country to country is marked: high levels of cybervictimization at around 57% (Spain) and relatively low values at around 13-14% (Canada; South Korea) (Ansary, 2020). In a study of European adolescents (six countries), approximately 35-37% reported the

victims of bullying and/or cyberbullying, highlighting that the burden is substantive regionally (Kowalski *et al*., 2014).

3.2. Risk Factors Associated with Cyberbullying

3.2.1. Individual Factors

Individual-level correlates include demographics (e.g. age, gender), as well as online behaviours and psychosocial characteristics (Zhu *et al*., 2021). Self-esteem acts as a protective factor: higher self-esteem relates to lower odds of victimization (Kowalski *et al*., 2014). Past exposure to violence increases risk; violence-exposed adolescents (physical/sexual abuse, intimate partner violence) are more likely to be victimized (Kowalski *et al*., 2014).

3.2.2. Family Factors

The family context: quality of parent-child relationships appears often in literature to be relevant to both risk and protection (Zhu *et al*., 2021). Exposure to domestic violence (e.g. witnessing violence against mother) associated with increased risk bullying/cyberbullying victimization (Kowalski *et al*., 2014) focused work talks about parental support and involvement in young people's use of technology, rather than just restrictive control (Ansary, 2020).

3.2.3. School and Social Factors

School and peer ecology are critical. Positive school climate comes up repeatedly as protective (Zhu *et al*., 2021). Perceived support from teachers and classmates is associated with decreased chances of victimization (Kowalski *et al.*, 2014). Stakeholder perspectives further reference school-wide awareness and relationship repair approaches to online conflict (Ansary, 2020).

3.2.4. Consequences of Cyberbullying

The above reviewed evidence connects all forms of cyber victimization to substantial mental health harms, such as depression, anxiety, loneliness, and low self-esteem (Ansary, 2020; Zhu *et al*., 2021). Social consequences involve difficulties in peer relationships and withdrawal (Ansary, 2020). School functioning can decline via disengagement and absenteeism (Zhu *et al*., 2021). Importantly, associations with suicidal ideation/behaviour are noted, characterizing cyberbullying as a serious public health hazard (Ansary, 2020).

4. Ethical Dimensions and Digital Citizenship

Cyberbullying is another close focus topic that intersects with themes of digital ethics and the promotion of responsible digital citizenship. Linguistic features of comments on social media suggest that comments including bullying show systematic differences in lexical and sentimental profiles as compared to non-bullying comments, and explicit and implicit bullying shows different patterns (Zhong *et al*., 2022). This finding suggests that cyberbullying prevention initiatives must incorporate norms and, making large, quantitative collection prohibitively challenging and perhaps hard to interpret (Zhu *et al*., 2021). This enables comprehensive interpretive activation of findings from public health, psychology, education, and digital ethics literature (Zhong *et al*., 2022).

5. Prevention and intervention strategies

5.1. School-Level Interventions

Promising directions include education about cyberbullying and consequences, digital citizenship programming, and social skills training, alongside school procedures for responding to online conflict (Ansary, 2020). According to the global review, effective prevention relies on active involvement at multiple levels within schools, along with the presence of a supportive school environment (Zhu *et al*., 2021).

5.2. Role of the Family

Family-oriented strategies stress active parental engagement and mediation of technology use by parents. Research cited in prevention-collaborative texts indicates that making rules with teens may be more effective at reducing risk than applying blanket restrictions (Ansary, 2020). According to the global review, effective prevention relies on active involvement at multiple levels within schools, along with the presence of a supportive school environment (Zhu *et al*., 2021.

5.3. Social and Institutional Interventions

At broader levels, stakeholders argue for coordinated, multi-sector approaches (education, health, community services), while research on language patterns supports developing detection/governance tools and norms that discourage harmful online discourse (Zhong *et al*., 2022). Cross-national variation and rising prevalence reinforce the need for systematic, multi-pronged public health responses and international collaboration (Zhu *et al*., 2021).

5.4. Role of the Social Worker in Preventing and Intervening in Cyberbullying

Research indicating that social workers help reduce the negative impacts of online bullying has highlighted how social workers are involved in assisting at least some victims of cyberbullying, even if seldom mentioned directly by the adolescents they help. Cyberbullying can lead to emotional problems like sadness, anxiety, and low self-esteem. If a teenager has no one to turn to, these problems can get worse (Noret *et al.*, 2020). In these cases, the social worker will help, listen, advise, and support youngsters to deal better with the problems. It is also very important for adolescents to have the safety of other trusted adults such as teachers/counsellors/professionals to help them navigate and cope with the situation (Noret, Hunter, & Rasmussen, 2018). The social worker's role is connecting child, family, and school to better ensure everyone is working together to help the child. The family has a very big responsibility, too. If parents do not get involved or talk to their children about what they do online, there is an increased risk of cyberbullying (Aljasir & Alsebaei, 2022). So, the social worker also teaches parents how to create safe spaces for their children and how to protect them on the Internet. In conclusion, the social worker helps adolescents by listening to them and providing emotional support, gives them ideas for coping skills to use in difficult situations, works with the family and school, and helps to prevent cyberbullying.

5.5. Bronfenbrenner's Ecosystem Theory and Cyberbullying in the School Context

Rather than highlighting one student, it may be more informative tactically to use Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory of ecosystems because, instead of developing in one ecosystem, a child develops in many and they feed off each other. Current research confirms that this is a timely and relevant way to study cyberbullying today (Patel & Quan-Haase, 2024). Applied to the phenomenon of cyberbullying, this theory states that it does not occur through random acts but the intersection of that interaction at the individual, close relationship, school, and society levels. Recent studies suggest that involvement in cyberbullying among youth as victims or aggressors is a function of each of those levels (Guo *et al*., 2021). At the individual level, age, gender, online activities, or personal self-esteem can increase or decrease risk, but research suggests that these do not operate in isolation. Relationships with family, peers, and teachers are equally important and part of the adolescent's microsystem. For example, a more positive school climate and good relationships with teachers may have a multi-pronged impact on involvement in bullying behaviours (Sahin-Ilkorkor & Brubaker, 2025). Furthermore, the socio-ecological approach recognizes that the involvement process also comes by way of indirect sources – the involvement of social services, school policies, and the community context. The involvement of support services such as mental health and

social work services in schools has been found to significantly lower rates of cyberbullying (Sahin-Ilkorkor & Brubaker, 2025). And this is where school comes in not just as the place in which these behaviours occur, but the place in which they can also be treated and/or prevented. Programs utilizing ecosystem theory, with the collaboration of students, teachers and parents alike, when employed, have been shown to reduce the behaviours in question (Toulu-Shams *et al*., 2018), indicating that intervention may be necessary on a larger scale than the individual. Finally, here we have the social workers. He/she does not simply work with the student, is not just the link between family, school, and community, providing counselling and emotional support, mediating, and helping to facilitate stronger ties between the child's microsystem and mesosystem, but also in his/her work in school programs and through his/her work with other social services contributes to broader workplace interventions. More recent studies suggest that the best way to prevent cyberbullying may lie not in individuals, but in strategies that touch multiple levels of the ecosystem (Patel & Quan-Haase, 2024; Sahin-Ilkorkor & Brubaker, 2025). Taking a larger view of cyberbullying does not help diminish bad behaviours that lead to those spaces being dangerous and unfriendly, especially for teens; taking a broader view of cyberbullying takes the issue from being a one-person problem to being part of how every person and every interaction is functioning and the larger context in which they sit. This is where social workers have a vital part to play: they are perhaps uniquely amongst workers in having the potential to intervene against each of these places that cyberbullying tends towards.

In conclusion, a clear implication from some of the materials we reviewed is the importance of digital ethics education. Zhong *et al*. (2022) show how cyberbullying can, at least partly, be regarded as a language-based moral problem: bully-pupils differ in the language of their correspondence and documents – bullying from not-bullying and explicit from implicit bullying (e.g. the latter uses less explicit language) have different signatures and characteristics. This is a rationale for prevention models based on the development of ethical and responsible digital citizenship (including norms of respectful communication and an awareness of harm), rather than just legal enforcement/command and control.

As compared with prior reviews, this set of documents collectively underlines that prevalence continues to rise and is uneven across the world (Zhu *et al*., 2021); risk is a part of more extensive systems of exposure to violence and support for young people's trauma recovery (Kowalski *et al*., 2014); and prevention work is most trustworthy when conducted through multi-level approaches that integrate schools and families, and draw on a moral grounding for digital citizenship, rather than single component interventions (Ansary, 2020; Zhong *et al*., 2022).

6. Discussion

An increasing number of studies find that cyberbullying is common among adolescents and negatively associated with various outcomes. Unfortunately, it is not always easy to compare these studies since researchers often employ different methodologies. Zhu *et al*. (2021) explain that the wide range in victimization/perpetration rates is mainly due to how researchers define and measure cyberbullying, as well as the time frames considered. These reasons also explain why prevalence rates vary by context (e.g. across countries, between studies yielding high and low estimates).

Yet, within this heterogeneity, there are broad similarities: cyberbullying is associated with poor psychosocial outcomes and is influenced by central contextual factors at school, family and social levels. For example, Kowalski *et al*. (2014) demonstrate how exposure to other violence (physical/sexual abuse, witnessing domestic violence, exposure to intimate partner violence) raises risks for bullying/cyberbullying victimization, while teacher/classmate support and self-esteem are identified as protective factors – findings that resonate with the multi-level risk and protective factors frameworks synthesized by Zhu *et al*. (2021).

These convergent patterns highlight the value of prevention in advance of exposure, given added vulnerability to harmful communication when entering the digital world with pre-existing psychosocial risk (e.g. violence exposure, weak supports). Stakeholder-informed recommendations for prevention underscore awareness in schools, social skills, and restorative response to online conflict, and meaningful parental engagement in their youths' technologies use (Ansary, 2020).

7. Limitations

A couple of limitations come out of the analysis of these studies that should be considered when interpreting these findings. One significant limitation is the heterogeneity in study design and methodological approach across studies. The reviewed studies use various definitions of cyberbullying, different recall periods, and measure in different ways, leading to limitations in comparing prevalence and effect sizes (Zhu *et al*., 2021). This heterogeneity partly accounts for the wide variance in the reported prevalence and limits the generalizability across countries and cultures.

Second, most studies are cross-sectional, and depend on self-reports, limiting the capacity for causal inference. Zhu *et al*. (2021) and Kowalski *et al*. (2014) highlighted that the absence of longitudinal designs makes it difficult to ascertain the temporal nature of associations between risk factors (i.e. prior exposure to violence, low self-esteem) and involvement in cyberbullying, and the long-term mental health impact of victimization.

Third, selection bias poses another challenge. Many studies derive their sample from school-aged populations excluding adolescents not enrolled in school or those who may be educated in alternative contexts and may be more vulnerable. Non-probabilistic sampling and voluntary participation increase the likelihood that the most vulnerable adolescent populations are underrepresented (Kowalski *et al*., 2014; Ansary, 2020).

Moreover, some studies may only be applicable to specific regions, languages, or platforms, which makes it difficult to compare even within disciplines. The linguistic studies of cyberbullying are often language- and context-specific and so not transferable to other cultural contexts (Zhong *et al*., 2022). On the other hand, the convergence of evidence from different disciplines adds to the strength and confidence in the findings of this review.

8. Conclusions

Victimization and perpetration are commonplace forms of experience for adolescents and young people, with some evidence that both have increased since 2015 (Ansary, 2020; Zhu *et al*., 2021), and that they are widely experienced across countries. Cyberbullying is clearly a risk to young people's well-being.

Together, these findings suggest a multi-level model whereby individual factors like age, gender and online activities interact with psychosocial factors like self-esteem and empathy (Zhu *et al*., 2021; Jaskulska *et al*., 2022), while family and school factors (e.g. quality of family relationships, school climate, social support) were found to be significant contributors to risk. Experiences of exposure to other forms of violence (e.g. childhood abuse, conflicts), while also increasing risk, could be counterbalanced by protective factors in peer groups, teacher relationships, and higher self-esteem (Kowalski *et al*., 2014).

These patterns are borne out in large-scale international data sets. Deryol, Wilcox, & Stone (2021) note that bullying and cyberbullying are pressing public health problems and that the extent to which it is experienced varies in magnitude from country to country. Their cross-sectional study data involving 110,835 adolescents across 23 countries reveal that both individual level characteristics and conditions at the aggregate level shape victimization. Adolescents who participate in deviant/risk taking behaviours (e.g. physical aggression, alcohol or substance use, unstructured peer activities) are at increased risk of being bullied, and poor psychosocial adjustment (low life satisfaction, poor peer relationships, poor academic results) increases risk of exposure to bullying even further (*idem*). Poor physical health/appearance (somatic complaints, poor body image) is also related to elevated exposure to bullying. At a level more closely related to social and structural conditions, countries with higher human development index scores report lower levels of bullying and cyberbullying. Apparently, hindsight is 20/20, and societal support systems serve protective functions for adolescents after all (*idem*).

Conclusively, the data suggest that cyberbullying occurs in a maze of social contexts children traverse throughout the day and, therefore, needs a holistic arms race around the cyberbully, cyberbullying, and its potential nefarious effects – whether that means policies from the school administrators or parents unwilling to view the content of an innocent appearing child's phone (Ansary, 2020; Zhu *et al*., 2021; Zhong *et al*., 2022).

Such initiatives should not only aim to alter individual behaviours, but also to promote change within the social, educational, and institutional contexts surrounding adolescents. A broader, systems-level view – one which considers individual-, proximal-, and remote-level variables in tandem – offers a more realistic route out of a situation where greater numbers of adolescents are acquiring, and overcoming, the undesirable label of "cyberbully" (Deryol, Wilcox, & Stone, 2021) regarding how to identify and respond to experiences of cyberbullying, modules on digital safety and communication in curricula, and research-based mediation advice to parents. In terms of decision-making incentives, synergistic public health and education policies aimed at reducing risk and exposure among adolescents to online harm and supporting young people's healthy participation in safe online activities (Zhu *et al*., 2021; Zhong *et al*., 2022).

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Digital Literacy and the Reproduction of Social Inequalities in Digitalized Education: Implications for Educational Management and the Social Integration of Children from Single-Parent Families

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Abstract. *This paper analyses digital literacy from a sociological perspective, as a form of cultural and social capital that can reproduce or reduce inequalities in digitalized education, with a focus on the social integration of children from single-parent families. Based on an exploratory qualitative approach grounded in interviews with students, parents, and teachers, the study highlights how differences in digital competence influence school participation, teacher–student relationships, and the sense of belonging within the classroom group. The findings show that, in the absence of institutionally equity-oriented support, digitalization may amplify pre-existing vulnerabilities, particularly for children with limited resources and parental support. The paper emphasizes the role of educational management in transforming digitalization into a tool for inclusion through differentiated support strategies and school–family–community partnerships.*

Keywords: *digital literacy, social inequalities, digitalized education, single-parent families, social integration, educational management.*

1. Introduction

In recent years, the digitalization of education has become more than an institutional option; it has turned into a structural framework for how schools operate, how teachers, students, and families communicate, and how educational resources are accessed. The experience of distance learning accelerated this transformation and made a crucial fact visible: technology does not automatically produce equity. On the contrary, when introduced without compensatory measures, digitalization can amplify already existing differences among students, depending on family resources, the support available at home, infrastructure, and digital usage skills. The UNESCO report on technology in education highlights the ambivalent nature of these transformations and the need for decisions to be guided by relevance, equity, and evidence (UNESCO, 2023).

In this context, digital literacy becomes a central variable. In a narrow sense, it is associated with the ability to use a device or an application; in a sociological sense, however, digital literacy functions as a resource that accumulates unevenly and can produce cumulative educational advantages. Therefore, being digitally competent

involves not only usage, but also critical evaluation, self-regulation, and the ability to transform technology into a tool for learning and social participation.

At the level of public policy, Romania has articulated explicit directions through the SMART.Edu strategy (Ministry of Education, 2020). However, the existence of a strategic framework does not guarantee the reduction of gaps, especially for vulnerable groups.

This paper starts from a sociological premise: digital literacy can be interpreted as a form of cultural and social capital, and its unequal distribution may influence not only school performance, but also students' social integration. In the tradition of analyses regarding the reproduction of inequalities through educational institutions, school is not a neutral space, but a context in which family resources and institutional norms can generate cumulative advantages (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Complementarily, the concept of social capital, understood as relationships, networks, and norms that facilitate support, provides a useful framework for understanding how adult support and trust relationships can mediate the effects of vulnerability on educational trajectories (Coleman, 1988).

Within this equation, children from single-parent families represent a relevant and insufficiently discussed case in relation to digitalization. Romanian sociological literature emphasizes that the single-parent family must be treated as a family alternative, without "deviant" connotations, while also recognizing the associated structural constraints (Gherghel, 1999; Voinea, 2005). In a digitalized school, such constraints may be converted into educational and relational disadvantages: where family support for digital tasks is limited, the student may experience participation difficulties, performance anxiety, and withdrawal from interactions.

Beyond the school dimension, social integration is a distinct stake: it is expressed through the sense of belonging, the quality of peer relationships, participation in activities, and social recognition within the group. Moreover, European data indicate the persistence of risks of poverty or social exclusion for children living in single-parent households, which justifies increased attention to compensatory mechanisms within the educational environment (Eurostat, n.d.).

The central research question of this study is: *How does digital literacy contribute to the reproduction or reduction of social inequalities in digitalized education, and how does it influence the social integration of children from single-parent families?* In addition, this paper discusses implications for educational management in terms of institutional decisions that can transform digitalization into a tool for inclusion.

2. Theoretical Framework. Digital Literacy, Social Inequalities and Education

2.1. Digital Literacy – From Competence to Social Capital

Digital literacy is defined in literature as an integrated set of competencies that enable the effective, critical, and responsible use of digital technologies in educational, professional, and social contexts. According to the conceptual framework proposed by UNESCO, digital literacy includes the ability to access, analyse, evaluate, and create information using digital technologies, as well as the ability to communicate and collaborate in diverse digital environments (UNESCO, 2018).

Contemporary approaches emphasize that digital literacy cannot be reduced to instrumental technical skills; rather, it involves the development of critical thinking, cognitive autonomy, and ethical responsibility in relation to technology use. In this sense, digital literacy is associated with processes of continuous learning and adaptation to the dynamics of the digital environment, becoming an essential condition for active participation in the knowledge society (Bourdieu, 1986).

Digital Literacy and Cultural/Social Capital

Analysing digital literacy through the lens of capital theory highlights its role in reproducing and transforming social structures. According to Bourdieu's theory (1986), cultural capital represents a set of symbolic resources and competencies that facilitate social integration and access to educational and professional opportunities.

In the context of a digitalized society, digital competencies can be considered an extension of cultural capital (OECD, 2020), as they influence access to information, education, and professional mobility. Individuals with a high level of digital literacy benefit from increased opportunities for social integration and civic participation, provided that these competencies are supported through continuous learning processes and meaningful educational practices.

In the absence of such competencies, the risk of digital exclusion becomes significant, affecting individuals' ability to benefit from educational and social resources available in the digital environment.

Differences in Access and Use of Technology

Although digitalization has considerably expanded access to technology, significant inequalities persist in terms of how digital resources are used and valued. These differences are conceptualized through the notion of the digital divide, which includes both the infrastructural dimension of access and the competency dimension of digital literacy.

OECD data and analyses indicate that the level of digital competencies is closely correlated with socio-economic status, level of education, age, and area of residence (OECD, 2020). These disparities contribute to the deepening of educational and social inequalities, especially among vulnerable groups.

In this context, the development of digital literacy must be approached as a strategic priority in educational and social policies, aiming to reduce digital exclusion and promote social inclusion in an increasingly technologically mediated society.

2.2. Social Inequalities in Digitalized Education

The processes of educational digitalization take place within a social context marked by pre-existing structural inequalities that cannot be automatically eliminated. On the contrary, in the absence of institutional compensatory mechanisms, the integration of digital technologies into education may contribute to the reproduction of already existing social differences. From a sociological perspective, the educational system tends to value the cultural resources and competencies that students have previously acquired, thus favouring social groups with higher levels of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Bryman, 2016; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Within digitalized education, these mechanisms of reproduction manifest through significant differences regarding access to digital equipment, the quality of Internet connectivity, the level of digital competencies, and educational support within the family environment. On the one hand, students from socio-economically advantaged backgrounds are better positioned to capitalize on digital educational resources. On the other hand, students from vulnerable contexts face additional difficulties in adapting to the new educational requirements.

OECD analyses indicate that differences in educational performance associated with the use of digital technologies are closely linked to socio-economic status, suggesting that digitalization tends to consolidate educational inequalities rather than reduce them (OECD, 2020).

Digitalization as Opportunity and Social Risk

Educational digitalization is frequently associated with the possibility of expanding access to education and increasing the flexibility of learning processes. The use of digital platforms and online educational resources can facilitate access to diversified content and support individualized learning, especially for students in geographically or socially disadvantaged contexts.

However, these potential benefits are conditional upon the existence of adequate material resources and competencies. In their absence, digitalization may become a factor of social vulnerability, amplifying educational exclusion. UNESCO reports highlight that the rapid transition to digital forms of education has revealed significant disparities among students, particularly regarding access to technology and educational support (UNESCO, 2021).

School as a Space of Compensation or Amplification of Inequalities

In the context of digitalized education, the role of the school becomes central in managing the social effects of technology use. Educational institutions can act either as

spaces that compensate for digital inequalities, by providing equitable access to resources and pedagogical support, or as mechanisms that amplify them when technological integration is implemented without an equity-oriented strategy.

World Bank analyses show that educational policies combining access to digital infrastructure with the development of teachers' digital competencies and differentiated support for students can contribute to reducing educational gaps (World Bank, 2020). In the absence of such interventions, the use of digital technologies risks favouring already advantaged students and reinforcing existing educational hierarchies.

Thus, the school holds a strategic role in transforming educational digitalization into a tool for social inclusion, provided that explicit policies aimed at reducing inequalities and supporting vulnerable groups are adopted.

2.3. The Single-Parent Family and the Child's Social Integration

In the sociological analysis of childhood and educational trajectories, the single-parent family cannot be treated as a problematic category, but as a form of family organization whose social significance depends on the economic context, support networks, and the way institutions, school, social services, and community respond to the child's specific needs. Comparative OECD syntheses show that the effects associated with living in a single-parent family vary across countries and are closely linked to social policies, labour markets, and parental support measures, suggesting that risks can be mitigated through coherent public interventions (Chapple, 2009).

Structural Vulnerabilities and Mechanisms of Risk

The vulnerability framework associated with single-parent families is often connected to structural pressures: lower income, limited parental time, increased stress, unequal access to services, and variable informal support. From a mechanism-oriented perspective, these conditions may influence the child's education in two ways:

- directly, through material and logistical resources (e.g. learning conditions, homework support);
- indirectly, through emotional climate and the family–school relationship (Chapple, 2009; Amato, 2015).

Moreover, literature on post-divorce family dynamics highlights the role of mediating processes – interparental conflict, quality of parenting, and co-parenting – in explaining child adjustment, emphasizing that risk is not uniform and can be reduced through adequate relational conditions and support (van Dijk *et al*., 2020).

Recent Romanian research repeatedly has shown that difficulties are not limited to the material dimension, but also include relational and institutional aspects: how the school interprets the family situation, the willingness to collaborate with the parent, and access to support resources (Varga & Chipea, 2022; Costin, 2023). In this sense,

vulnerability can be understood as the result of an accumulation of constraints (time, stress, resources, networks), which become particularly visible when the school transfers responsibilities to the family, such as monitoring digital tasks, communication, and educational support.

Social Integration: Belonging, Relationships, and Recognition

A child's social integration in the school environment goes beyond academic performance and is expressed through a sense of belonging, peer acceptance, participation in activities, and the perception of recognition and safety within the group. Conceptually, "school belonging" is a robust indicator of school adjustment, associated with motivation, engagement, and educational outcomes. Methodologically, it has been operationalized through instruments such as the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) scale (Goodenow, 1993).

For children from single-parent families, social integration may be affected by subtle mechanisms such as social labelling ("problem child"), differences in participation (absences, limited access to extracurricular activities), or communication difficulties between family and school. Romanian studies suggest that relational difficulties and positioning within the peer group may be linked to teachers' perceptions, classroom climate, and the type of support provided (Varga & Chipea, 2022; Costin, 2023). In this perspective, social integration becomes a negotiated outcome between family resources, school practices, and peer group dynamics.

The Role of School and Community: From "Diagnosis" to Support

A crucial aspect of the sociological approach is avoiding explanations reduced to the individual level ("the student does not adapt") and shifting the focus toward contexts and practices: how the school responds to differences, what forms of support exist, how the partnership with the parent is constructed, and what community resources can be mobilized. Studies on education and single parenthood consistently conclude that differences observed between children from single-parent and two-parent families are largely explained by resources and support rather than by family structure itself, which makes institutional interventions both relevant and legitimate (Amato, 2015; Härkönen, 2017).

In Romania, recent discussions on single-parent families indicate the need for integrated educational, social, and community approaches that reduce pressure on the parent and prevent child marginalization, including access to counselling, support programs, and inclusive school measures (Mocanu et al., 2025; Bădescu, 2020).

Thus, single parenthood is not treated as a final explanation, but as a context in which mechanisms of resources, support, and belonging become more visible and more sensitive to institutional intervention.

3. The Social and Educational Context of the Research

3.1. Digitalization of Education at the Institutional Level

Educational digitalization can no longer be understood solely as a process of technical equipment provision, but rather as an institutional transformation that affects school organization, teacher–student–family communication, access to resources, and forms of assessment. In recent years, this transformation has become more visible through the widespread use of learning management platforms, digital resources, and the expansion of online communication channels between schools and families.

At the national level, digitalization policies are reflected in strategic documents aimed at modernizing the educational system and reducing digital competence gaps (European Commission, Joint Research Centre, 2022). However, the implementation of these directions depends on the local capacity of schools, community resources, and the extent to which teachers and students are supported in using technology effectively. In this context, institutional planning includes not only equipment and connectivity, but also communication rules, the organization of digital tasks, pedagogical support, and inclusive school cultures (Ministry of Research, Innovation and Digitalization, 2025).

In single-parent families, time and resource constraints may reduce the possibilities for consistent support of the child, which can affect not only task completion but also the sense of belonging and the quality of relationships within the classroom group. Therefore, the analysis of digital literacy and associated inequalities must be placed within a concrete socio-educational framework where structural constraints, institutional practices, school norms, and relational mechanisms intersect.

3.2. Educational Policies Regarding Inclusion and Digital Competencies

Recent OECD analyses show that policies combining investment in infrastructure, pedagogical support, and continuous teacher training have a positive impact on reducing digital gaps in education. Such policies include national standards for students' and teachers' digital competencies, the integration of digitalization into national assessments, and the development of continuous professional training programs in the digital field (OECD, 2023a).

At the European and international level, Romania participates in initiatives aimed at fostering digital inclusion and expanding digital competencies. For instance, within the European Union's Digital Decade program, indicators on population digital competencies are reported annually. European data place Romania below the EU average in terms of digital skills, highlighting a relevant gap for participation in digitalized education and the need for targeted support programs (Eurostat, 2024).

These statistics are relevant not only for the general population, but also for the educational system: the low overall level of digital competencies influences how

students approach digital learning and how schools must design support programs for digital skill development.

At the curricular policy level, Romania has begun introducing digital competencies from primary education, although their systematic integration into the national curriculum remains an evolving process. Public opinion reflects support for digitalization: recent surveys indicate that approximately 70% of Romanians consider the integration of digital technology in schools to be beneficial, with this perception increasing in recent years. From an international perspective, the OECD report *Education and Skills in Romania* (2025) emphasizes the need to strengthen educational policies that promote equity and quality in digital learning, recommending better data use and a competency-oriented approach at all educational levels.

3.3. The Role of School and Community in Supporting Vulnerable Children

Educational digitalization must be understood as part of a broader social transformation in which access to the Internet, devices, and digital competencies has become relevant for civic participation, access to information, and educational opportunities (Boeskens & Meyer, 2025). In Romania, official data indicate an increase in household connectivity, but with significant urban-rural disparities. For example, in 2024, the share of households with Internet access at home was high at the national level, but with notable differences between urban and rural areas (National Institute of Statistics, 2024). This uneven distribution suggests that schools operate in a social environment where the premises for digital participation differ significantly among students.

At the European level, educational digitalization is supported by a strategic framework that promotes both the quality of digital learning and the dimension of inclusion. The Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027) defines a common vision for the development of digital education and includes measures aimed at institutional capacity, digital competencies, and reducing access barriers (EUR-Lex, 2022; European Commission, 2025). For the Romanian context, this direction is particularly relevant, as it requires a dual reading of digitalization: as an opportunity for modernization, but also as an area where inequalities may be reproduced in the absence of stable compensatory measures.

At the institutional level, educational digitalization translates into infrastructure, connectivity, equipment, educational management platforms, school–family communication, and digital learning resources. In relation to the theme of this paper, this contextualization has a specific stake: children from single-parent families may experience more acutely the effects of institutional and community constraints. In environments where educational support is externalized to family monitoring digital

tasks, online communication, platform accessing the time and resources of a single parent become critical factors.

Moreover, differences in infrastructure and connectivity may limit consistent participation, with consequences for classroom relationships and the sense of belonging. Therefore, the analysis of digital literacy and associated inequalities cannot be separated from the concrete social and educational context: urban and rural, socio-economic, institutional, and community dimensions.

Accordingly, the following sections present the research methodology as an empirically grounded approach and the interpretation of results distinguishes between:

- structural constraints (resources, infrastructure);
- institutional constraints (school practices);
- relational mechanisms (social integration, support, belonging).

These dimensions become particularly relevant for students from single-parent families, for whom resource constraints, limited parental time, and variable community support can directly influence school participation, peer relationships, and the sense of belonging.

4. Research Methodology

This research aims to analyse the role of digital literacy in the reproduction or reduction of social inequalities within the context of digitalized education, with a specific focus on the social integration of children from single-parent families. The methodology is designed in accordance with the objective of exploring the social and educational mechanisms that mediate the relationship between digital competencies and the educational experiences of children in situations of social vulnerability.

The central research question guiding this study is: *How does digital literacy contribute to the reproduction or reduction of social inequalities in digitalized education, and how does it influence the social integration of children from single-parent families?*

4.1. Type and Design of Research

The study was conceived as an exploratory sociological approach aimed at understanding how digital literacy correlates with educational experiences and social integration in the context of digitalized education. The choice of an exploration design is justified by the complex and contextual nature of the phenomenon under investigation, as well as by the need to capture the perspectives of the actors involved regarding digital educational practices and social relationships within the school environment.

The research adopts a qualitative approach focused on interpreting participants' experiences and perceptions. This methodological choice allows for the identification of

social and educational mechanisms through which differences in access, competence, and digital support may influence school participation and the sense of belonging of children from single-parent families.

4.2. Population and Sample

The research population consisted of actors directly involved in digitalized educational processes, namely students, parents, and teachers. The sample was constructed through purposive selection, with the main criterion being the relevance of participants to the research topic.

The sample included:

- children from single-parent families enrolled in pre-university education, selected to capture their educational and relational experiences in the context of digital media use;
- single parents, who provided information regarding available educational support, digital resources, and the relationship with the school;
- teachers involved in educational activities requiring the use of digital tools and direct interaction with students.

Participant selection aimed to capture a diversity of educational experiences, considering access to technology, frequency of digital tool use for school purposes, and involvement in digitalized educational processes.

4.3. Methods and Research Instruments

The main method of data collection was the semi-structured interview, chosen for its capacity to capture the subjective dimensions of educational experience and social integration. The interviews allowed for the exploration of participants' perceptions regarding the use of technology in education, the difficulties encountered, available forms of support, and the impact of these factors on social relationships within the school environment.

The interview guides were structured around several central themes:

- access to digital resources and their educational use;
- digital competencies and difficulties encountered in school activities;
- support provided by the family and by the school;
- the child's social integration, expressed through participation, peer relationships, and the sense of belonging.

The formulation of questions was adapted to each category of participants, and accessible language was used, particularly in the interviews conducted with students.

4.4. Research Stages and Data Analysis

The research was conducted in several successive stages. In the first stage, theoretical documentation and the definition of the conceptual framework were carried out, based on which the interview guides were developed. Subsequently, participants were selected and informed consent was obtained, in accordance with the ethical principles of sociological research.

The interviews were conducted and later fully transcribed. Data analysis was performed using thematic analysis, aiming to identify recurrent patterns and relevant differences among the perspectives of students, parents, and teachers. This approach enabled the identification of mechanisms through which digital literacy can function both as a supportive factor and as a source of vulnerability in the social integration processes of children from single-parent families.

5. Research Results. Digital Literacy in Children's Experiences

The analysis of the interviews conducted with students, parents, and teachers highlights the central role of digital literacy in shaping children's educational and social experiences, with visible effects on school participation and social integration. The results are presented thematically, in relation to the level of digital literacy, educational trajectories, and experiences of social integration, with particular attention to children from single-parent families.

5.1. Level of Digital Literacy in Participants' Experiences

Interview analysis reveals significant differences in terms of effective access to technology and the use of digital educational resources. Most interviewed children report having access to at least one digital device; however, this access is often limited or shared within the family. Particularly in single-parent families, children and parents describe situations in which device use is conditioned by other family members' schedules, Internet connection quality, or the lack of adequate equipment for more complex educational activities.

Teachers confirm these perceptions, emphasizing that differences are not limited to the mere existence of devices, but rather concern children's ability to use them effectively for educational purposes. In this sense, digital literacy is described as a competence built gradually and largely dependent on the support provided by both family and school.

Differences Between Children From Single-Parent and Two-Parent Families

Participants' accounts indicate that students from single-parent families more frequently face difficulties in using educational platforms, managing digital tasks, and solving minor technical problems. These difficulties are associated, in the discourse of

parents and teachers, with limited parental time, varying levels of adult digital competence, and the lack of consistent support for school activities conducted online.

In this context, digital literacy appears as an unevenly distributed resource that functions as a form of digital cultural capital and, in the absence of institutional support, risks contributing to the maintenance or even amplification of educational differences.

5.2. Digital Literacy and Educational Trajectory

The interviews reveal a clear connection between the level of digital literacy and the way children participate in digitalized educational activities. Students who perceive themselves as digitally competent describe more active participation in online activities, the use of additional educational resources, and a higher level of autonomy in completing school tasks.

By contrast, children facing digital difficulties report a tendency to avoid educational platforms or to use them at a minimal level, only to fulfil mandatory requirements. This limited use reduces learning opportunities and may lead to a more fragile relationship with the digitalized educational process.

Impact on the School Experience

From the participants' perspectives, digital literacy indirectly shapes the school experience. Students with more developed digital competencies describe more efficient task management and easier adaptation to the requirements of digitalized education. In the case of children from single-parent families, digital difficulties are frequently associated with delays in homework completion, frustration, and a negative perception of their own academic performance.

Teachers note that these difficulties are sometimes interpreted as a lack of involvement, highlighting the importance of understanding the family context and the real limitations children face.

Relationship with Teachers and Peers

Digital literacy also influences educational relationships. Students with lower levels of digital competence describe difficulties in communicating with teachers through online platforms and a sense of distance from peers, especially in contexts where interactions are digitally mediated. In contrast, students who feel digitally competent report smoother relationships with teachers and more active participation in group activities.

5.3. Children's Social Integration in the School Environment

Sense of School Belonging

Thematic analysis indicates that digital literacy is closely linked to the sense of belonging to school. Children who perceive themselves as competent in using educational technologies describe school as a more accessible and inclusive space.

Conversely, children with digital difficulties, particularly those from single-parent families, report feelings of insecurity and detachment from the school environment.

Group Relationships and the Risk of Marginalization

Differences in digital competence influence peer group dynamics. Participants' accounts show that students who struggle with technology are more exposed to the risk of marginalization, especially in situations where educational and social activities rely on digital tools. This marginalization is described as subtle, manifesting through reduced participation, withdrawal, or symbolic exclusion.

Digital Environment: Integration or Isolation

The digital environment appears as an ambivalent space in participants' experiences. On the one hand, it can facilitate social integration through communication, collaboration, and access to educational resources. On the other hand, in the absence of pedagogical and institutional support, the digital environment can intensify the isolation of children with low digital competencies.

For children from single-parent families, these risks are amplified by limited resources and variable parental support, underlining the importance of educational interventions oriented toward digital inclusion.

6. Discussion. Implications for Educational Management. Conclusions and Recommendations

Research findings confirm that digital literacy exceeds the sphere of individual technical competence and is configured as a social factor with significant impact on children's educational trajectories and processes of social integration. Interview analysis shows that differences in digital competence translate not only into distinct forms of school participation, but also into different relational experiences, affecting the sense of belonging and students' positioning within the classroom group. For children from single-parent families, these effects are amplified by resource constraints and limited support, which assigns educational management to a strategic role in mediating the relationship between digitalization and social inequalities.

6.1. Educational Management and the Reduction of Digital Inequalities

From the perspective of educational management, the findings suggest the need to move beyond an approach focused exclusively on infrastructure and technological access. Although participants acknowledge the importance of equipment and digital platforms, the reported experiences indicate that access to technology is insufficient in the absence of functional digital competencies and coherent institutional support.

Thus, digitalization can function either as an instrument of inclusion or as a mechanism that intensifies vulnerabilities, depending on how it is managed at the institutional level. Consistent with literature, schools that adopt an equity-oriented

managerial vision are better positioned to use digitalization as a resource for reducing educational gaps (OECD, 2020). In this regard, educational management has the responsibility to identify the specific needs of vulnerable students, allocate resources differentially, and monitor the impact of digital practices on concrete educational experiences.

6.2. Institutional Support Strategies for Vulnerable Children

The interviews indicate the need for explicit institutional support strategies for children from single-parent families. Participants describe situations in which the lack of consistent support in using the digital environment leads to educational difficulties and relational withdrawal. In this context, punctual interventions are insufficient; an integrated approach is required, combining technological support with pedagogical and socio-emotional assistance.

According to international recommendations, effective interventions in digitalized education are those that treat digital literacy as both an educational and a social process, rather than merely technical training (UNESCO, 2021). School is, therefore, called upon to function as a space of social mediation, capable of mitigating the effects of family vulnerability on the child's educational trajectory.

6.3. Role of Teachers, School Counsellors, and School Leadership

Teachers, school counsellors, and school leadership occupy key positions in transforming digital literacy into a factor of social integration. Participants' accounts show that digital difficulties can affect the student–teacher relationship, leading to relational distancing and decreased school engagement. In this sense, teachers are not only mediators of digital content, but also central actors in the early identification of participation and integration difficulties.

School counsellors can play a significant role in supporting students through the development of socio-emotional competencies and by facilitating adaptation to the demands of digitalized education. At the managerial level, school leadership has the responsibility to create an institutional framework that supports interdisciplinary collaboration and values digital inclusion as a strategic objective, not merely as a technical solution.

6.4. School–Family–Community Partnership

A central aspect highlighted by the research is the importance of the *school–family–community partnership* in supporting inclusive digital literacy. In single-parent families, time and resource constraints often limit parental involvement, which increases the role of the school and local community. Participants emphasize the relevance of

community initiatives and collaboration with non-governmental organizations and local authorities in expanding educational support for vulnerable children.

This perspective is consistent with European orientations in the field of digital education, which emphasize the role of local partnerships in promoting inclusion and reducing digital exclusion (European Commission, 2020).

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

Research results indicate that digital literacy plays an essential role in shaping children's educational and social experiences, functioning as a factor that can either support or limit school participation and social integration. For children from single-parent families, difficulties related to access, competence, and digital support tend to overlap with other forms of vulnerability, amplifying the risk of educational and relational marginalization.

In this context, educational management is called upon to assume an active role in transforming digitalization from a purely technical process into an instrument of equity and inclusion, through institutional strategies that consider family diversity and students' real needs.

At the level of public policy, the conclusions support the need to integrate digital literacy as a transversal dimension of educational and social policies, especially in relation to supporting children from vulnerable backgrounds. Educational digitalization cannot be treated solely as a technological modernization objective, but must be accompanied by measures aimed at reducing inequalities and preventing exclusion. Monitoring the impact of digital practices on educational equity and developing programs dedicated to children from single-parent families can contribute to evidence-based, inclusion-oriented policies.

Regarding digital literacy programs, the findings underline the importance of adapting them to beneficiaries' socio-cultural contexts and including relational and socio-emotional dimensions in the training process. Effective digital literacy implies not only the development of technical skills, but also supporting children's capacity to actively participate in school life and to build meaningful social relationships in the educational environment. The involvement of family, community, and educational actors in such programs can transform digital literacy into a genuine factor of social integration, contributing to the reduction of vulnerabilities and the promotion of equity in digitalized education.

8. Future Research Directions

The results of this study open several directions for future investigation. Further research could explore longitudinally how digital literacy influences the educational trajectory and social integration of children from single parent families or comparatively

analyse different types of social vulnerability. Additionally, future studies may assess the effectiveness of institutional interventions and inclusive digital literacy programs, contributing to the development of evidence-based educational policies.

Acknowledgement

In the preparation of this paper, the authors have used the ChatGPT artificial intelligence model (version 5.2) exclusively for the purpose of refining and finishing the expression of the text. The scientific content, argumentative structure and interpretations presented belong entirely to the authors. All suggestions generated by the AI have been critically analysed, verified and validated by the authors, who assume full responsibility for the accuracy, originality and integrity of the works.

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Youth Socialization Between School and the Digital Space: Continuities, Ruptures, and Implications for Educational Management in Urban-Rural Contexts

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Abstract. *This study examines youth socialization at the intersection of school and the digital space in the context of accelerated digitalization. It explores how traditional agents of socialization coexist with online environments that function as autonomous social spaces with distinct norms and mechanisms of validation. Using a comparative urban-rural perspective, the research highlights differences in relational structures, access to resources, and patterns of belonging. The study adopts a mixed-methods design, combining questionnaires, semi-structured interviews/focus groups, and document analysis, and focuses on lower-secondary students from urban and rural schools. Findings indicate that, while school remains a significant space for socialization, digital interactions increasingly shape peer relationships, reputation, and group dynamics. Rural contexts tend to foster denser and more stable social ties, whereas urban contexts display greater relational fragmentation and polarization. The results underline the need for preventive and context-sensitive educational management strategies that integrate socio-emotional and digital education within school culture.*

Keywords: *socialization, adolescents, school, digital space, urban–rural, social identity, interpersonal relationships.*

1. Introduction. Why Is It Important to Talk Today About Youth Socialization?

We live in a society in which technology has become an integral part of our lives, so pervasive that it can no longer be ignored. It is a society marked by such an advanced level of technological progress that it is gradually redefining the essential aspects of everyday life. In this context of accelerated digitalization, the younger generation, being frequently exposed to technology, benefits in certain respects, and these benefits are undeniably significant. A digitalized generation, constantly connected to technology, has rapid – if not instantaneous – access to information. Studies indicate that technology contributes substantially to facilitating the learning process, not only through quick access to information but also through the adaptation of educational resources to students' individual needs. Through digital tools and adaptive platforms, students can learn more efficiently, receiving personalized feedback in real time and using resources aligned with their learning style and pace. This reduces time spent on

redundant activities and increases focus on relevant concepts. Such personalized adaptation minimizes unnecessary cognitive load and supports students in understanding and retaining information more effectively, thus transforming technology into an essential ally in simplifying and optimizing the learning process (Haleem *et al*., 2022).

Moreover, recent studies show that technology also redefines the way young people form, maintain, and sustain interpersonal relationships. When social networks are used in a balanced manner, they can significantly enhance young people's ability to create, maintain, and strengthen interpersonal relationships by stimulating connectivity, supporting a sense of belonging, and offering opportunities for emotional expression, even when individuals are geographically separated. Conversely, excessive use may diminish the depth of social ties (Anitha *et al*., 2025). To further emphasize this essential contribution of technology to maintaining interpersonal relationships among young people, a study conducted in India shows that approximately 60% of young people believe social networks have strengthened interpersonal relationships, including family relationships, by contributing to more intensive and frequent communication (Imam & Tanisha, 2023).

Nevertheless, despite the positive benefits associated with the use of technology among young people, including from the perspective of interpersonal relationships, frequent use of social networks may also contribute to the emergence of a generation disconnected from reality. The accelerated pace of digitalization can foster a generation detached from real-life interactions, connected primarily to its own inner universe and largely ignoring the dynamics of direct social relationships. Technology has, thus, altered the paradigm of youth socialization. While previous generations experienced socialization mainly within traditional institutional and community frameworks – such as family, school, and the local community – today social networks and virtual communities function as central spaces for interaction, validation, and self-affirmation. Although social networks can enhance socialization, young people increasingly fill their time spent online with various activities and concerns, and the amount of time devoted to technology is substantial.

A study conducted by Rideout (2015) highlights a significant difference in the amount of time allocated to media use by children and adolescents compared to previous generations. In the 1990s, children and adolescents spent, on average, no more than four hours per day interacting with various forms of technology and media. More recent data indicate a substantial increase: today, children spend approximately six hours per day using digital media, while adolescents may exceed nine hours daily, exclusively for recreational media consumption, excluding time dedicated to school or educational activities (*idem*). This study reveals a marked increase that reflects not only expanded access to technology but also the deep integration of the digital environment into young people's daily lives, influencing how they communicate, access information, and relate

to reality. Young people now spend more time in front of screens than they do at school, leading to a gradual reduction of face-to-face interactions in Favor of online interactions.

Traditionally, school – alongside other long-established institutions – has been regarded as a primary agent of socialization. Through interactions in the school environment, both with teachers and peers, young people acquired social skills, respect for rules, a sense of responsibility, and community belonging. In the context of digitalization, however, this role of the school is increasingly being questioned. Recent research indicates that the role of the school as an agent of socialization is undergoing significant transformation in digitally saturated societies. Digital socialization has become dominant among students, making the adaptation of the educational system increasingly urgent (Evren, 2023). At the same time, recent literature on agents of socialization highlights the growing presence and influence of the digital environment in young people's socialization processes, suggesting that digital interactions do not merely complement traditional forms of socialization but may redefine classical patterns. Consequently, the traditional school is no longer the sole space in which young people construct socially meaningful relationships (Gebremariam, Dea & Gonta, 2024).

In contemporary society, young people increasingly operate within an area of overlap between traditional frameworks of socialization – family, school, and community – and the digital environment, which exerts a growing influence on how social relationships are formed and maintained. Recent literature shows that the digital space does not eliminate classical socialization processes, but rather transforms and extends them, offering young people new forms of interaction and social belonging that transcend the boundaries of the local community (Nesi, Choukas-Bradley & Prinstein, 2020; Livingstone, Stoilova & Nandagiri, 2021).

At the same time, differences between urban and rural environments remain significant, as unequal access to technology generates distinct patterns of socialization – characterized by a stronger orientation toward the digital environment in urban areas and the continued prominence of family and community relationships in rural settings (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023; Roberts & Hernandez, 2022).

2. Theoretical Framework. Youth Socialization Between Traditional and Digital Contexts

In sociology, the concept of socialization is defined as a dynamic and continuous process that does not end with childhood but unfolds throughout the entire life course. Through this process, individuals assimilate and internalize values, norms, roles, and behavioural patterns that are essential for the functioning of social structures. The distinction between the two main types of socialization – primary and secondary – has

particular relevance in sociological research, with recent studies highlighting the need to reinterpret this distinction in the context of accelerated digitalization (Branje, 2021).

2.1. Socialization as a Sociological Process

Primary socialization occurs in the early years of life and is closely linked to a child's first interactions with the surrounding environment, particularly within the family context. It is within this setting that the foundations of personal identity, emotional attachment, and behavioural self-regulation are formed. Recent research emphasizes that the family plays a crucial role in emotional and moral socialization, shaping the development of socio-emotional competencies and influencing how children later relate to social institutions (Wesarg-Menzel *et al*., 2023).

Secondary socialization, by contrast, takes place through formal institutions and extended social groups, most notably school, peer groups, and the wider community. Literature indicates that the transition from primary to secondary socialization is not linear, but involves processes of identity negotiation and the reconfiguration of the social self, particularly during adolescence. In the context of digitalization, the distinction between primary and secondary socialization requires conceptual reconsideration, as the boundaries between the two become increasingly permeable. Early exposure to digital environments gives rise to socialization experiences that combine characteristics of both forms. Consequently, processes traditionally associated with secondary socialization may occur much earlier, even before formal integration into educational institutions, which have conventionally been considered the primary context for secondary socialization (Branje, 2021; Sugimura *et al*., 2024).

2.2. The Digital Space as a New Environment of Socialization

Traditional agents of socialization – family, school, and peer groups – continue to play an essential role in young people's social development, even in a digitalized context where socialization can take alternative forms. However, contemporary literature no longer treats these agents as isolated entities but rather as interdependent elements within a more complex system of social influences (Valiente *et al*., 2020). The transformations brought about by digitalization have led to the emergence of the digital space as a distinct and autonomous environment of socialization, operating alongside traditional frameworks but governed by its own mechanisms of interaction, validation, and social identity construction.

In contemporary sociology, the online environment is no longer viewed solely as a communication tool but as a complex social space in which relationships are initiated, maintained, and reinterpreted, and where norms and values are continuously negotiated. Recent studies emphasize that digital socialization is not a passive extension of offline interactions but an active process that profoundly shapes how individuals

relate to themselves and to others (Nesi, Choukas-Bradley & Prinstein, 2020; Livingstone, Stoilova & Nandagiri, 2021).

2.3. Continuities and Ruptures Between Traditional and Digital Socialization

The digital environment plays a central role in the formation of social identity by providing young people with a space for experimentation and self-expression. Literature highlights that online identity is constructed through ongoing processes of self-presentation, content selection, and social feedback, which influence how individuals perceive themselves and are perceived by others (Branje, 2021; Gebremariam, Dea & Gonta, 2024). Recent studies suggest that online contexts facilitate identity exploration by enabling individuals to adopt multiple social roles and test different forms of belonging. At the same time, quantified social validation – through likes, comments, and shares – becomes a central mechanism in consolidating social identity, influencing self-esteem and the sense of social acceptance (Gebremariam, Dea & Gonta, 2024). In this respect, social identity is no longer constructed exclusively through direct interactions but is co-created within a digital space characterized by constant visibility and evaluation.

Despite these continuities, the digital environment also introduces structural ruptures in the construction and maintenance of social relationships. One of the most significant transformations concerns increased visibility and the quantification of social relations. Symbolic indicators such as likes, content sharing, or follower counts become key reference points in evaluating social status, altering traditional mechanisms of interpersonal validation (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). This shift profoundly affects the dynamics of young people's relationships, fostering social comparison and an orientation toward performativity. Relationships tend to become more fluid and unstable, influenced by the accelerated pace of digital interactions and the pressure to maintain a constant online presence. From this perspective, digital socialization generates forms of relating characterized by high intensity but often limited depth, marking a rupture from classical relational patterns based on direct interactions and stable contexts (Kietzmann *et al*., 2011).

One area in which ruptures between traditional and digital socialization become particularly visible is the relationship between the educational institution and the online environment. Schools operate according to formal norms, institutionalized authority, and standardized mechanisms of evaluation, whereas the digital environment is characterized by emergent norms, diffuse authority, and implicit rules shaped by virtual communities and algorithms (Selwyn, 2019). Recent literature highlights that this structural divergence generates tensions in school socialization processes, as students are required to navigate between distinct and sometimes contradictory normative frameworks. While schools promote conformity and the internalization of explicit rules,

the digital environment encourages identity autonomy, self-expression, and the continuous negotiation of norms (Williamson, Eynon & Potter, 2020). This dissonance may lead to role conflicts, adaptation difficulties, and a weakening of the school's symbolic authority.

In this context, literature argues that schools can no longer be conceived as exclusive agents of socialization but rather as actors that must redefine their role in relation to the digital environment. The critical integration of digital competencies and media education thus becomes essential for reducing tensions between the two spaces and for supporting coherent and balanced socialization among young people (Selwyn, 2019; Williamson, Eynon & Potter, 2020).

3. Educational Context and the Urban-Rural Dimension

The urban-rural dimension represents an essential analytical framework for understanding educational processes and youth socialization, as the place of residence shapes educational opportunities, access to resources, and relational patterns. International sociological and educational literature emphasizes that differences between urban and rural settings cannot be reduced to material disparities alone, but rather reflect distinct social, cultural, and institutional configurations that shape students' school experiences and life trajectories (Azano & Stewart, 2016; Corbett & Bæck, 2016). In the context of educational digitalization, these differences acquire new meanings, as the digital environment does not eliminate existing inequalities but may instead intensify or reconfigure them. Consequently, the urban–rural perspective is relevant not only for assessing access to education, but also for understanding how schools and communities contribute differently to youth socialization, social identity formation, and integration into broader social networks.

Urban and rural schools operate in markedly different educational contexts, shaped by population density, socio-cultural diversity, and the relationship between the school institution and the local community. Comparative international studies show that urban schools generally benefit from more diversified educational offerings, greater access to specialized staff, and increased exposure to cultural pluralism, which supports the development of social competencies in heterogeneous environments (Corbett & Bæck, 2016). In contrast, rural schools are often deeply embedded in local community life, functioning as social and cultural hubs. Research indicates that in rural settings, relationships among students, teachers, and parents tend to be closer, and schools fulfil extended social roles beyond academic instruction (Azano & Stewart, 2016). While this proximity may foster social cohesion and a strong sense of belonging, it can also limit exposure to educational diversity and alternative social models, influencing young people's educational aspirations. These structural differences are reflected in the school's socializing role: in urban contexts, socialization is mediated by multiple

institutions and networks, whereas in rural areas the school remains a primary agent of secondary socialization with heightened normative influence (Hargreaves, 2021).

Educational inequalities linked to place of residence are closely associated with socio-economic status, cultural capital, and access to relevant social networks. International meta-analyses reveal a consistent relationship between socio-economic context and educational outcomes, highlighting that students in rural areas are often exposed to cumulative structural disadvantages (Sirin, 2005). Sociological research shows that urban environments provide more diversified social capital, facilitating access to information, educational models, and opportunities for social mobility. Conversely, rural contexts tend to reproduce more restricted social relations based on proximity and stability, which may limit young people's aspirational horizons. These disparities are reflected in school dropout rates, access to higher education, and labour market integration. From a sociological perspective, urban–rural inequalities are not merely the result of individual differences, but expressions of social and institutional structures that shape young people's educational and social trajectories.

The local community plays a crucial role in socialization processes, particularly in rural settings, where social relations are closely tied to geographic space and local traditions. Social capital theories emphasize that community involvement in school life supports students' retention in education and the consolidation of social identity (Putnam, 2000). Empirical studies show that in rural areas, the community functions as an informal socialization framework in which norms and values are transmitted through direct and stable relationships. This form of bonding social capital can support social integration but may also limit access to external networks and diversified educational opportunities (Israel & Beaulieu, 2004). In urban settings, local community roles are often fragmented, and youth socialization is mediated by multiple institutions and digital networks (Philip & Garcia, 2013). This configuration promotes bridging social capital, facilitating social mobility and exposure to diversity, while potentially weakening community cohesion and local belonging (Putnam, 2000).

4. Methodology

4.1. Type of Research

The research was designed as an exploratory sociological investigation with a descriptive-analytical orientation, focusing on youth socialization between school and the digital space, with particular emphasis on urban-rural differences. The exploratory character of the study was justified by the dynamic and context-dependent nature of the phenomenon, which is difficult to reduce to a single explanatory framework. The research did not merely aim to describe practices, but sought to understand the relationships between everyday interactions, belonging, group norms, and student–student and student-teacher relationships within distinct urban and rural configurations.

To achieve the research objectives, a mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative and qualitative components in a sequential explanatory design. The quantitative component aimed to identify general patterns of student socialization, forms of digital media use, and urban–rural differences, allowing for subgroup comparisons. The qualitative component served to explain and contextualize these findings through an in-depth analysis of social mechanisms and meanings. Overall, the study adopted a cross-sectional and comparative design, based on methodological triangulation, in order to capture both the descriptive and interpretative dimensions of the phenomenon under investigation.

4.2. Population and Sample

The research population consisted of lower-secondary school students, for whom socialization takes place simultaneously in two major influential spaces: school, as an institutional environment of formation and integration, and the digital space, as an environment of interaction, validation, and belonging. The selection of the lower-secondary level was justified by the specific characteristics of this educational stage, marked by intensified peer-group relations, increased social autonomy, and the consolidation of online presence, all of which have a direct impact on social identity formation.

The population was defined comparatively by including students from both urban and rural settings, in order to capture differences related to social context, access to resources, and digital infrastructure. Participant selection was based on sociologically relevant criteria: age (approximately 11-15 years), educational level (lower-secondary education), and place of residence (urban/rural).

The sample was constructed to ensure a balanced distribution between residential environments. In the quantitative component, several classes from each setting were included to ensure data comparability, while in the qualitative component, participants were selected purposively to capture diverse profiles of digital media use and social integration. Overall, the sample provided an adequate basis for a comparative urban–rural analysis of socialization processes in lower-secondary education.

4.3. Research Methods and Instruments

In line with the research objectives, a mixed methodological design was employed, combining quantitative and qualitative methods through the administration of a sociological questionnaire, the conduct of semi-structured interviews and/or focus groups, and the analysis of educational documents. These methods were used complementarily to capture both the descriptive dimension of the phenomenon (patterns, frequencies, urban–rural differences) and its interpretative dimension (meanings, norms, and social mechanisms).

The sociological questionnaire was used to identify regularities in students' school-based and digital socialization, focusing on the intensity of digital media use, forms of belonging, the overlap between school and online relationships, and differences between urban and rural contexts. Questionnaire items were formulated in language appropriate to the lower-secondary level, and Likert-type scales were used where necessary.

The qualitative component, conducted through semi-structured interviews and/or focus groups, allowed for a deeper exploration of students' subjective experiences and for clarifying mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, reputation negotiation, and the transfer of conflicts between online and school contexts, as well as perceptions of teachers' roles and school rules.

The analysis of educational documents complemented the field data by providing an institutional framework for interpretation, relating students' practices to school norms and policies regarding behaviour and digital media use. By integrating these instruments, the research examined the phenomenon at the level of social practices, meanings attributed by students, and institutional responses of the school.

4.4. Stages of the Research Process

The research was conducted in three successive stages: instrument design, data collection, and integrated data analysis. In the first stage, research instruments (questionnaire, interview/focus group guide, and document analysis grid) were developed and refined in relation to the study objectives and the characteristics of the target population, with preliminary checks conducted, where possible, to ensure clarity and adequacy.

The second stage involved administering the instruments in urban and rural schools under comparable conditions. Questionnaires were administered uniformly, in compliance with ethical principles concerning informed consent, anonymity, and research involving minors. Interviews and focus groups targeted students with diverse experiences of socialization and digital media use. Relevant educational documents were collected at the institutional level to complement the field data.

In the final stage, quantitative data were processed through descriptive analyses and urban–rural comparisons, while qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis, focusing on identifying mechanisms of belonging, group norms, conflict, and transfer between online and school contexts. Document analysis provided the institutional interpretative framework. The integration of the three data sources enabled the formulation of coherent conclusions relevant to grounding implications for educational management.

5. Research Findings. How Do Young People Socialize Today?

The analysis of data from six lower-secondary schools (three urban and three rural) indicated that school remained a relevant space for socialization, although students' experiences varied according to school community type and local social context. For comparability, schools were categorized by residential environment and community characteristics. Overall, school-based socialization was structured around interconnected dimensions, with peer interactions, student–teacher relationships, and the perception of school as a space of belonging playing central roles. At this educational level, socialization was predominantly shaped by peer relationships, reflecting a horizontal pattern, while interactions with teachers varied depending on institutional climate and communication styles.

Differences between urban and rural contexts were particularly visible in peer relationships. In rural schools, especially those near urban centres, students reported more positive relations and higher classroom cohesion, supported by stable friendship networks and repeated interactions across school and community settings. In contrast, urban schools showed greater relational fragmentation. Central urban schools were characterized by active but segmented peer networks, while neighbourhood schools more frequently displayed tensions and polarization, with exclusion coexisting alongside integration. Small-town schools occupied an intermediate position, with more favourable peer evaluations and relational climates closer to rural settings, highlighting the importance of community size and mutual familiarity.

Student–teacher relationships were generally evaluated more cautiously than peer relationships. Rural students more often reported closeness and open communication with teachers, who were perceived as community-integrated actors, whereas in urban neighbourhood schools relationships were assessed more critically, with lower trust and perceptions of formalized or delayed institutional responses. In terms of conflict management, students across contexts preferred informal strategies, relying on peers or direct resolution and avoiding adult involvement in moderate situations, reflecting norms of autonomy and some reluctance toward institutional intervention.

The perception of school as a space of belonging emerged as a key indicator of social experience. While some students experienced school as a space of acceptance and integration – more frequently in rural and small-town settings – others perceived it as functional but socially distant, a pattern more visible in urban neighbourhood schools. Overall, the sense of belonging was closely linked to peer relationship quality and the presence of protective mechanisms against exclusion or humiliation.

Finally, urban-rural differences were better interpreted as variations in social structure rather than evaluative oppositions. Rural socialization was denser and more stable, supporting cohesion but increasing vulnerability to labelling and rapid conflict diffusion, whereas urban socialization was more fragmented, allowing relational

flexibility but associated with lower cohesion and higher risks of intergroup tensions. Small-town schools functioned as an intermediate case, combining urban dynamics with relational density similar to rural contexts.

5.1. Youth Socialization in the Digital Space

The data indicated that digital socialization no longer functioned as a separate activity from everyday life, but rather as a permanent layer of students' social relationships. For a significant proportion of respondents, online communication represented a continuation of face-to-face interactions, with class groups, private conversations, and content consumption serving as key contexts for constructing belonging, reputation, and informal hierarchies. Digital socialization thus operated as an integrated social environment rather than a parallel sphere.

Across all six schools, students' digital presence combined two relatively stable forms: direct communication through private messages and group chats, and the consumption of short-form digital content, such as reels, short videos, and memes, which frequently functioned as a shared generational language. Messaging, particularly within class groups and private conversations, and viewing short videos were the most frequent activities, used both for relaxation and as resources for social interaction. Differences between schools were not related to online presence itself, but to patterns of use. In urban schools located in the county capital (U1 and U2), digital interaction was more strongly oriented toward public exposure, visibility, and image management through content sharing and reactions. In small-town and rural schools (U3, R1-R3), digital use was more often directed toward maintaining group cohesion through communication, coordination, and informal exchanges rather than public self-presentation.

For some students, the online environment was perceived as a more accessible space for communication than face-to-face interaction. Agreement with the idea that self-expression was easier online was higher in schools characterized by more fragmented school socialization, particularly in the U2 profile. From a sociological perspective, the digital space functioned as a mechanism for reducing the pressure of direct interaction, allowing students to control communication pace, avoid immediate confrontation, and test group reactions.

Beyond interaction patterns, social networks played a broader role in organizing students' everyday lives. They functioned as informal infrastructures for social coordination, enabling the exchange of school-related information, planning of activities, and maintenance of symbolic practices of belonging, such as shared jokes or group rituals. At the same time, the digital environment served as a space for social validation and reputation building, especially in urban contexts, where reactions, comments, inclusion, or ignoring became salient indicators of social status and visibility.

In situations where school was perceived as a tense or socially distant environment, the online space also operated as a compensatory refuge, offering alternative sources of belonging through relationships outside the class or through thematic communities. While this pattern was most evident in contexts marked by relational tension and lower school integration, it was not exclusive to urban settings and appeared in some rural schools as well.

Regarding intensity of use, students from urban schools reported higher levels of time spent online more frequently, although comparable levels were also observed in more isolated rural contexts. This finding suggested that the digitalization of socialization was not an exclusively urban phenomenon, as online environments functioned in certain rural settings as channels for extending social life beyond the immediate community (Boyd, 2014).

The analysis further showed that the digital space reproduced and, in some cases, amplified classic group mechanisms such as inclusion, exclusion, hierarchy formation, and symbolic sanctions. Students perceived online groups as governed by informal rules, even in the absence of explicit norms. Belonging was often validated through responsiveness and adherence to implicit codes, with higher conformity pressure observed in urban contexts oriented toward visibility, and stronger emphasis on group cohesion in rural settings. One of the most frequent forms of sanction was exclusion through ignoring, manifested by lack of responses or removal from conversations, a subtle mechanism that was difficult to address institutionally but had a strong impact on students' sense of belonging. Additionally, the data revealed a notable level of emotional vulnerability associated with digital interactions. A relevant proportion of students reported feeling upset or hurt by online situations such as ironic comments, exclusion, or group pressure, indicating that the digital environment carried significant emotional weight and directly shaped students' social experiences across both urban and rural contexts.

5.2. Continuities and Ruptures Between School and the Digital Space

The findings indicated that school-based and digital socialization did not operate as separate spheres, but as interdependent spaces that intersected daily. For most students, relationships formed at school extended into the online environment, with classmates present in digital groups and conflicts and status negotiations circulating between the two contexts. However, this overlap did not consistently produce continuity and was often accompanied by tensions and subtle forms of distancing.

For a substantial proportion of students, school friendships overlapped with online relationships, with the digital environment functioning as an extension of classroom life. This overlap strengthened group cohesion in contexts with higher relational density, such as rural areas close to urban centres and small towns, while also

enabling the expansion of social networks, particularly in urban and digitally connected settings. At the same time, inclusion was uneven, as some students who appeared integrated at school were excluded from digital groups, with digital distance functioning as a relevant marker of marginalization.

Conflicts frequently transferred between the two spaces. Disagreements originating online often continued at school and vice versa, intensifying through public reactions and group involvement. A particularly subtle form of tension involved exclusion through ignoring, which, despite leaving no explicit traces, had a significant impact on students' sense of belonging. These dynamics were accompanied by normative tensions, as behaviours acceptable online were not always aligned with school norms, a gap amplified by visibility in urban contexts and by community pressure in rural settings.

From a social identity perspective, students constructed their sense of self through a combination of school-based and digital belonging, pointing to the emergence of a mixed social identity. In cohesive school communities, the digital space reinforced existing relationships, while in fragmented contexts it functioned as a compensatory arena for recognition. Overall, the results highlighted the interdependence of school and digital environments and emphasized the need to integrate the digital space into educational interventions as a constitutive element of school life.

6. Discussion. Implications for Education and Educational Management. Conclusions and Directions for Intervention

The findings showed that school remained a central space of socialization, although its role was increasingly challenged and reconfigured by the digital environment. Students' socialization unfolded simultaneously within formal institutional frameworks and informal digital contexts, generating a dual form of belonging that placed pressure on traditional mechanisms of school cohesion and social control. In this context, specific difficulties emerged in managing subtle forms of exclusion, conflicts circulating between online and classroom settings, and tensions between explicit school norms and the informal rules governing digital interactions.

These results indicated the need for educational management to treat the digital environment as an extension of students' social lives rather than as an external dimension of schooling. Reactive and sanction-oriented interventions appeared to have limited effectiveness, while preventive approaches integrated into school organizational culture proved more appropriate. Such approaches included clear rules, functional procedures, safe reporting channels, and the systematic development of socio-emotional and digital competencies.

The urban–rural comparative analysis highlighted distinct social structures without implying a normative opposition. In rural contexts, denser socialization

supported cohesion but increased students' vulnerability to labelling and social pressure, whereas in urban contexts, relational fragmentation heightened the risk of polarization and exclusion. Consequently, the findings pointed to the need for differentiated managerial responses: protection of vulnerable students and discreet community-based interventions in rural settings, and strategies aimed at strengthening cohesion and reducing fragmentation in urban schools.

Teachers and school leadership played a key mediating role between institutional norms and informal digital rules. Students' tendency to avoid adult involvement in conflicts perceived as moderate emphasized the importance of building a culture of trust and support. Educational responsibilities included clarifying relational expectations, early identification of exclusion and conflict, the use of mediation, collaboration with families, and the institutionalization of educational practices addressing online behaviour.

The interpretation of results took into account the study's limitations, including its cross-sectional design, reliance on self-reported data, the lack of statistical representativeness of the sample, and variable access to institutional documents, all of which suggest caution in generalizing the findings.

7. Directions for Future Research

Future research could extend this study through longitudinal designs tracking changes in belonging and conflict during the transition from lower-secondary to upper-secondary education, as well as by incorporating the perspectives of teachers and parents. Comparative analyses across regions and types of communities (large urban, small urban, isolated rural) and evaluations of integrated educational interventions – such as socio-emotional development and digital education programs – would further clarify their effects on classroom cohesion and school climate. Additionally, examining the relationship between specific digital platforms and patterns of social validation or exclusion could provide a more nuanced understanding of the underlying mechanisms.

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CHAPTER 6. EDUCATION, SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY & STUDENT WELL-BEING

An Introduction to Resilience Factors in Controlling School Bullying

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Abstract. *This paper aims to identify protective factors in the context of school bullying and the role of social workers in developing resilience. Its first part describes the factors involved in preventing aggression. At the same time, it emphasizes the importance of effective communication, empathy, and collaboration among all those involved in school life. All these factors contribute to reducing bullying behaviours and creating a positive educational climate. The second part focuses on the school social worker's intervention in preventing bullying through activities such as: collecting information about the student; participating in medical and psychopedagogical assessments; reporting cases of neglect or abuse; collaborating to analyse bullying behaviour; implementing a program of positive intervention; implementing anti-bullying school programs; promoting the development of social skills and empathy; parenting; participating in screening and family intervention programs; recognizing bullying behaviours; increasing empathy and awareness of feelings.*

Keywords: *school social worker, bullying, students, resilience, family, teachers.*

1. Introduction

Bullying is the intentional and repeated act of hurting, insulting, or humiliating a person who finds itself in a position of inferiority to the aggressor (Olweus, 1994). The main characters of these acts are the victim, the aggressor, the witnesses and the "paparazzi", the ones that take photos or film the conflict and share it on social networks. Thus, bullying turns into cyberbullying, where the victim is subjected to repeated humiliation and the images remain permanently on social media platforms, where all those involved in the conflict become the subject of analysis, criticism, or praise from the online community.

Therefore, bullying often extends into the digital environment, evolving into cyberbullying. In this form, the victim becomes the target of repeated humiliation, while images or messages remain permanently accessible on social media platforms.

Consequently, all participants in the conflict may become subjects of public scrutiny, criticism, or even approval from the online community. Runcan (2020) emphasizes that, to support parents and teachers in preventing or addressing cyberbullying, it is essential for society as a whole to have a solid understanding of what cyberbullying entails, as well as the kinds of preventive and intervention strategies required to manage or, at least, reduce its impact.

Approximately 50% of students have been bullied at school, and 27% have bullied others. In addition, 82% of students have observed bullying at school (Save the Children Romania, 2023). According to the PISA 2022 survey, 25% of Romanian students aged 15 have experienced physical, relational, verbal, or blackmail bullying. Verbal abuse, ridicule, and rumours were the most encountered forms of bullying (Edupedu, 2022).

For the victims, the phenomenon of bullying and its negative consequences are major and long-term. They manifest in the form of physical injuries, psychological, and verbal abuse, as well as social consequences. Cyberbullying has become another problem, complicating matters with the development of technology. When we discuss the effects of bullying on a child, they are overwhelming: decreased self-esteem, mental health problems, poor school results. Thus, school social workers and teachers must remain on guard and apply the necessary measures to properly address and stop bullying (Nazarko, 2001; Zarzour, 2001; Mount, 2005; Gökler, 2009).

In their study, Goian *et al*. (2020) looked into how students from two different types of high schools understand and deal with bullying at school. They found that there were some clear differences between students from a national high school and those studying in a technological one. The study's conclusions emphasize the need to implement intervention and prevention programs, with a particular focus on national high schools, and highlight the importance of raising awareness of the effects of bullying in order to stimulate significant changes.

Le Menestrel (2020), highlights the fact that bullying is a serious mental health problem that can have severe adverse effects both on the aggrieved persons and on those who bully others but also on the witnesses. According to research conducted by Mohan & Bakar, 2021) and Coca (2022), bullying can cause a variety of negative consequences, including physical, emotional, and mental health problems, as well as decreased school performance. Esquivel, López & Benavides (2023) found that people who have been bullied are more likely to have mental health problems like sadness, anxiety, decreased self-esteem, and being generally lonely.

The recent studies on bullying mentioned above highlight the need for students to develop a "defence system" and this system is called resilience. Thus, the research

questions are outlined: *What are the resilience factors involved in preventing the negative effects of bullying? How can the school social worker contribute to this endeavour?*

To answer these questions, the objectives of the study are the following identifying resilience factors that can contribute to protecting students against bullying and identifying specific interventions of school social workers in promoting resilience.

2. Resilience Factors in Dealing with Bullying

Resilience is a determining element in controlling bullying in school, with research in the field indicating a variety of elements that contribute to its development. Ganotz, Schwab, and Lehofer (2021) highlighted the importance of social inclusion and maternal relationships in promoting resilience among elementary school students. Hinduja & Patchin (2017) emphasized the protective role of resilience in the prevention and mitigation of the effects of cyberbullying and bullying. Wade *et al*. (2007) and Moore & Woodcock (2017) have highlighted the importance of resilience in reducing stress, improving coping skills, maintaining emotional and behavioural well-being, and developing an optimistic outlook and healthy self-esteem. As can be seen from this research, it is imperative that students acquire resilience skills.

Several writers have looked at the idea of resilience in the setting of bullying, including Meseguer-de-Pedro *et al*. (2019), Geffner, Yang & Burton (2021), Lu *et al*. (2022), and Widiharto *et al*. (2022).

Someone is resilient if they can change when they face problems, like those caused by stress, pain, or bullying. Resilient people can adapt to adverse situations and use their own resources to handle them more successfully than others. We ask ourselves what are the critical aspects or resources that allow for a smoother transition in extremely stressful circumstances.

Consistent with the findings of Ganotz, Schwab & Lehofer (2021), we present below the protective variables discovered for resilience in the context of bullying:

Level of student integration in the classroom: children's sense of social integration in the classroom has been shown to influence their overall resilience.

Bonds with parents: researchers have shown that the level of quality of bonds between students and their mothers is another important factor that influences student resilience.

Sense of belonging in the classroom: coping with school challenges requires a strong sense of integration in the classroom.

Well-being in school: having a positive experience and feeling good at school helps students overcome difficult circumstances.

Positive relationships with teachers: a strong bond with teachers can help children get the support they need at school.

A strong bond with one's own parents is extremely important to help them overcome adversity.

Empathetic teaching style: a teaching method that includes empathy, kindness, acceptance, and order helps students grow and develop in a good way.

By analysing the research done by Goian *et al.* (2020), we can extrapolate other factors that favor mental and emotional safety against any bullying act.

Awareness and different perceptions on bullying: students aware of the negative effects of bullying and who know how to behave in the moment they are bullied will develop resilience skills.

Communication Skills: on one hand, students that can ask the proper authority for help when in the early phase of bullying; on the other hand, students that develop assertive communication skills with their colleagues, contribute to the prevention and reduction of the bullying phenomenon.

Positive Social Relationships: developing student-student/student-teacher social relationships, or with other school support staff (social worker, school counsellor), contributes to the building of a support network that protects against the negative impact of bullying.

Awareness of the need for an intervention and of preventive measures: students that are aware of the need of preventative intervention methods not only will be protected against acts of bullying but will help prevent such acts.

Involvement of school support staff: preventative measures as well as early phase intervention of the school social worker, of the school counsellors and other students determines the reduction of bullying attacks transpiring in the school.

Another significant factor in the development of resilience against harassment and bullying, according to Cosma, Baban & Balaszi (2014), is repeated exposure to conflict. At first glance, such an experience may seem painful and hard to manage. Nevertheless, in time, it contributes to the building of adaptation mechanisms that helps children react more clam when they are faced with similar difficulties.

In this context, when the family environment is positive, children feel safer and are less susceptible to become a victim of bullying.

3. The School Social Worker's Contribution to School Safety

Knapp, Berghuis & Dimmitt (2014) offer the following steps to create and maintain a safe school environment, minimizing bullying and encouraging healthy relationships: stopping bullying, threats, and aggression; school social workers wanting

all kids to feel secure and welcome; implementing school anti-bullying initiatives, actively monitoring student interactions, and working with instructors to rapidly recognize poor conduct helps achieve this; encouraging school community respect and empathy; organizing lessons and group activities to develop pupils' social skills aiming to promote respect, diversity, and acceptance of differences; fostering interpersonal empathy and compassion; assisting kids understand and feel others' emotions to improve empathy and interpersonal comprehension; encouraging good parenting by parents or caregivers; lecturing about open communication, limits, and emotional support in parent training classes to teach parents how to handle bullying and build resilience in their children.

Collaborating with other specialists to gather biopsychosocial data that will help understand what makes people become aggressive towards others. Together with psychologists, school counsellors, teachers, and parents, social workers can build a complete picture of each student who is involved in bullying, whether they are the bully, the target, or someone who is just watching. This overall assessment can help find the reasons behind bullying, such as family problems, mental health issues, or negative effects in the social environment.

To learn what causes students to bully others and what causes them to continue to bully, social workers can use methods such as functional behaviour analysis. Based on this method, actions such as mentoring services for children who are at risk, emotional control methods for children who are bullied or who suffer from bullying can get help from support groups, all students, including spectators, can go to classes to improve their social skills.

4. Anti-Bullying Measures and Interventions

Collecting information about the student: gathering detailed information regarding the social, medical, family, and behavioural history of each student participating in bullying.

Participation in medical and psycho-pedagogical evaluations: organizing and coordinating medical check-ups and psycho-pedagogical testing to assess the individual needs and abilities of students.

Reporting cases of neglect or abuse: reporting any potential situations of neglect or abuse to the appropriate protective agencies to ensure the safety of children.

Collaborating to analyse bullying behaviour: involving students, parents, and teachers in assessing bullying behaviours.

The implementation of a positive intervention program involves the creation and implementation of an intervention and support effort focused on encouraging optimistic behaviour, with the aim of producing good results.

As part of anti-bullying school programs, schools make and use programs that aim to stop bullying and promote healthy social relationships.

Parenting: parenting training is a thorough and educational process that helps parents learn effective ways to handle their kids' behaviour. This means figuring out what behaviours are bothersome and why they happen, as well as coming up with a plan for how to handle them in a good and helpful way.

Consulting parenting books: telling parents to read parenting books to find good ways to handle their kids' behaviour.

Recognizing bullying behaviour: being able to spot and understand bullying behaviour at school.

Concern and emotional awareness: understanding how people who have been threatened or scared feel and being able to show concern for them.

5. Results

The study's results show the resilience factors found in the specialist pieces that were looked at, highlighting several key aspects related to students' adaptation and well-being. Ganotz, Schwab & Lehofer (2021) wrote: how well kids are integrated into the classroom; having a good relationship with teachers, having a close relationship with parents, feeling like you fit in the classroom, and being happy at school are all important.

Goian *et al*. (2020) pointed out that awareness and varied perceptions of bullying, effective communication, and positive social relationships are also important.

Cosma, Baban & Balazsi (2014) added involvement in conflict, positive family relationships, recognition of the need for intervention and preventive strategies, and involvement of interested parties in the school.

Specific interventions of school social workers in promoting resilience belong to Knapp, Berghuis, & Dimmitt (2014): collecting information about the student; participating in medical and psychopedagogical assessments; reporting cases of neglect or abuse; collaborating to analyse bullying behaviour; implementing a positive intervention program; implementing anti-bullying school programs; promoting the development of social skills and empathy; parenting; participating in screening and family intervention programs; recognizing bullying behaviours; and increasing empathy and awareness of feelings.

6. Conclusion

To prevent bullying in schools, resilience is a skill that students should acquire, helping them to recover from certain adverse events in the school context and beyond. The degree of integration of students in the classroom, their relationships with parents, their sense of belonging to the class, their well-being at school, positive relationships with teachers and parents, understanding different points of view, communication skills, the ability to form positive social relationships, awareness of the need for intervention and prevention, and the involvement of all parties in school are aspects that make students more resilient to bullying. A positive family context and close relationships with parents are essential for developing resilience in students who have been victims of bullying.

The school social worker plays a key role in implementing long-term plans to combat bullying, with long-term goals such as stopping bullying and making the school a more welcoming place. Parent training and therapeutic interventions are necessary in preventing and managing bullying. On a general level, the school social worker helps make the school community a safer place and encourages healthy relationships.

The main goal of our work is to inspire kids to learn how to be resilient and have good life skills.

7. Limits

Because this study is based on only a few peer-reviewed pieces about bullying, we cannot say that we have discovered all of the resistance factors. There may be other important things in the studies that were not looked at in this study. The studies that were chosen were also affected by how easy it was to get their sources, which means that the results may not be applicable to everyone.

8. Future Directions for Research

Adding to the literature other traits of resilience that may help stop bullying. It would also be helpful to do a practical study, in schools, on how school social workers can help kids become more resilient.

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Education for Resilience: A Psychosocial Laboratory of Synergy and Transformation

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Abstract. *There is growing recognition that providing an education today involves far more than simply sharing knowledge; there is also a need to prepare young people with the ability to handle an uncertain future. This research conceptualizes education as a psychosocial laboratory with dimensions of resilience (psychological, sociological and social). On an individual basis, resilience is created at the micro-level when individuals develop emotionally, cognitively, and ethically; the term Inner King metaphorically represents the amount of autonomy and self-awareness necessary to effectively deal with adverse (negative) circumstances. At meso- level, schools are important in acting as sources of values and norms that build solidarity, inclusion, and civic responsibility, connecting personal resilience with community cohesion. At the macro level, education determines societal outcomes more broadly as it lessens exclusion and enhances equity in a world in a state of transition while resilient individuals support collective development. The holistic view shows that the processes of resilience come from both individual and structural angles. Integrating these dimensions not only trains learners to survive adversity, but also promotes social cohesion, promotes mental health, and establishes long-term community prosperity by creating a virtuous cycle of personal and societal resilience. Academic resilience – the capacity of socio-economically marginalized students to attain desirable academic success – continues to be a key focus of educational research. This paper assesses resilience using data on the TrEC longitudinal study that monitors students' performance in TIMSS (8th grade) and PISA. We study whether individual factors (e.g. attitudes toward learning, growth mindset) and school-related factors (e.g. mean school SES, type of school, and climate) can provide resilience, and examine whether these factors work in a consistent way in the same assessments. PISA 2018 and 2022 data showed that 10-11% of disadvantaged students are academically resilient on average, although the number can vary significantly around the world. Positive learning attitudes, school environments, and parental interest in supporting learning positively affect resilience and school-level SES predicts TIMSS success. These findings imply that enhancing resilience needs multisystem interventions across both individual dispositions and structural contexts; thus, we suggest some level of integrated education to promote more equity and high performance in all students.*

Keywords: *academic resilience, socio-economic disadvantage, educational equity, psychosocial framework, TIMSS, PISA.*

1. Introduction

Resilience has been researched in psychology, sociology, and education, but its relevance in contemporary educational contexts continues in a transformative,

developing context. Psychologically, resilience is the ability to adapt to adversities, including emotional regulation, cognitive adjustment, perceived competence and ethical reasoning (Rutter, 2012; Ungar, 2013; Masten, 2014; Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000). The 'Inner King' metaphor implies that self-control and independence are important to resilience, which in other words, is not a neutral response, rather is a proactive process of increasing one's personal potential (Jung, 1953). These capabilities are strongly influenced by early educational experiences, especially through programs aimed at improving emotional intelligence, self-esteem, and social-emotional learning (Durlak *et al*., 2011).

At the sociological level, schools function as the engines of norms, values and socialization. According to evidence, inclusive education, civic education, and peer networks can build collective sense of responsibility, solidarity, and adaptive behaviour (OECD, 2019). The presence of collaborative learning, ethical reasoning across all groups – including marginalized students – in our classrooms can turn education contexts into supportive contexts for resilience.

On a macro-social level, policies and structural factors shape the opportunities and barriers students face. In international assessments, including TIMSS and PISA, socio-economic status (SES) is associated with academic achievement, however a minority of disadvantaged students – m categorized as academically resilient – achieve in general academic excellence despite structural constraints (OECD, 2019; Chirkina, Shchetnikova & Froumin, 2022). Empirical evidence confirms that positive attitudes towards learning, growth mindset, parental support, and supportive school settings are associated with increased probabilities of resilience; school-level SES and school institutional settings are found to moderate outcomes (OECD, 2023).

Building on these theoretical frameworks, many researchers have studied education as the psychosocial laboratory where personal predispositions come together with institutional norms and social policy to develop resilience. Understanding how micro-, meso-, and macro-level variables interact with one another is critical to developing interventions aimed at improving academic performance and social well-being. As a result, there is a need for multilevel, multimodal approaches to education.

Methodology academic resilience is assessed in this study via a multi-level, longitudinal perspective that connects individual and school-related factors. The data were obtained from the Trajectories in Education and Careers (TrEC) study, a Russian longitudinal survey of student progress over several years. TrEC offers a unique opportunity to investigate resilience patterns, with two leading international assessments available: the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS, 8th grade) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), both conducted 1 year apart.

Participants consisted of students of various socio-economic backgrounds sampled from various regions of Russia. Socio-economic status (SES) was assessed by parental education, the support available to household resources and home learning environments (in line with OECD). The lowest 25% of SES students were included in the focus group when identifying academically resilient individuals, designated as disadvantaged.

Academic Performance Measures: Maths (TIMSS) (8^{th} grade) and science skills in this stage were assessed in a study using PISA, measuring reading, math and science competency one academic year later. Two standardized scores from these assessments were used to classify resilience. Adolescence and Resilience on Academic Level: Those students scoring the top 25% of national performance distributions in category the academically resilient score was included in the academic resilient assessment, following OECD process. Individual Characteristics: How did students perceive learning, growth mindset, self-competence and emotional regulation were assessed through student survey.

School-Related Factors: The characteristics of schools and demographics, school type (public vs. private), teacher-student ratio and general school climate were also considered as predictors of resilience.

Analytical Approach

Descriptive statistics initially were utilized to capture resilience rate measurements for TIMSS and PISA. The statistical model of resilience analysis used in logistic regression models explored the probability of a student being resilient as a response to both a predictor and school-level predictor at a single-point for a specific individual cohort. Interaction effects were examined to examine if factors were assessment-specific or generalized across TIMSS and PISA scores. Multilevel modelling was used as a technique to adjust for nested data structures (students from schools), for both micro level (individual) and meso- level (school) impacts.

This approach enables a comprehensive measure for resilience which is interlinked from the psychological to the sociological to the educational and it gives a good statistical basis for policy and intervention design.

2. Results

Resilience Rates: TrEC long-term data showed that about 10–11% socio-economically challenged students were academically resilient with high academic scores even with low SES. Resilience was comparable in TIMSS and PISA, although there were small differences in resiliency between TIMSS (mathematics and science) and PISA (reading, mathematics, and science one year after, e.g. 11.2% vs. 10.5% resiliency in mathematics and 10.8% in PISA reading). A select subset (≈7%) of students

reported resilience in both TIMSS and PISA, indicating inter- and inter-subject and longitudinal consistency of academic resilience.

Individual Level Predictors Logistic regression analyses identified that positive attitudes towards learning and growth mindset were closely related to greater likelihood of resilience (Odds Ratios [OR] between 1.35 and 1.52, $p < 0.01$). Emotional processing and a high contribution from emotional regulation and self-efficacy were important; their ORs were 1.28 for emotional regulation and 1.31 for self-efficacy. This work underlines the important implication that psychological and cognitive factor influence the resilience at the individual level. School- Level Predictors Factors Relating to the type of school and structure are the main school setting; general factors that played a significant role in school-related predictors in determining outcomes of resilience. Schools with higher average SES tended to provide higher chances of resilience for disadvantaged students (in particular, TIMSS performance) (OR = 1.44, $p < 0.01$). Overall, supportive school climates supported by good teacher-student relationships and effective disciplinary policies were significantly related to resilience in TIMSS and PISA. It is worth noting that, as compared to PISA test scores, the impact of school-level SES was more pronounced in the TIMSS, a finding consistent with some assessment-specific effects. Interaction Effects Multi-level models showed that the interplay of individual dispositions and supportive school environments created the greatest probability of academic resilience. High growth mindset and positive attitudes of students in low-SES schools, with resilience observed in lower (compared to high) means, underline the importance of both micro- and meso-level factors in order to promote equitable outcomes. “Extended Results – Additional Comparative Findings”

Additional comparative analysis, by examining large-scale international data, strengthens and expands upon individual and school-based predictors of academic resilience. The findings from the OECD’s PISA 2018 report show that positive interrelationship between parental support, teacher enthusiasm and students’ self-efficacy and resilience are consistent across a variety of contexts: students from underprivileged families who had high levels of emotional support of parents or teachers had much larger chances of attaining performance in the top quartile – often several percentage points above peers with low levels of support.

In addition, positive school climate variables – such as positive disciplinary climate and high levels of perceived student co-operation – are linked to stronger shares of resilient students; the difference in resilience rates of students in the top versus bottom quarters the disciplinary climate of OECD countries (mean 6 percentage points in the average, whereas there are even bigger differences in the measures in countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina and Italy (differences from 12 percentage points in the average).

At the school level, more equitable resource distribution, better support from teachers and collaboration in the classroom are associated with greater resilience rates. The PISA 2022 resilience analyses suggest that educational systems such as Japan, Korea, Lithuania, and Chinese Taipei have high resilience in the areas of mathematics, equity, and student sense of belonging, indicating that systemic fairness in learning and social opportunities lead to higher resilience outcomes. In addition, student sense of belonging at school is associated with resiliency; countries with students reporting above-average belonging are positively associated with resiliency and negatively associated with feelings of social disconnection – suggesting how meso- and macro-level climate factors affect individual dispositions to promote resiliency.

Importantly, interaction analyses suggest that individual dispositions and school settings do not exist in isolation. High self-efficacy and growth mindset students demonstrate increased probabilities of resilience of students across school climates, but, the highest resilience rates are observed in positive and supportive school environments when they have positive individual factors. Indeed, despite controlling for socioeconomic disadvantage and previous success, students who face high- or low-risk factors tend to demonstrate the stronger resilience in a school setting, which has the highest disciplinary climate and strong cooperative peer relations than in schools with less supportive climates. This interplay of influence speaks to the multi-level construction of the phenomenon of resilience: individual psychological resources are magnified through supportive school environments and climate, forging mutually beneficial routes to accomplishment in adversity.

Overall, findings provide evidence for an education view of education as a psychosocial lab, in which resilience develops through the dynamic interaction between individual strengths and systems of support. Both TIMSS and PISA evidence highlight personal dispositions (micro level) and the need to build school and classroom environment (meso- level) to promote the fullest resilience of underprivileged students and their families.

3. Discussion

The results of this investigation confirm the multi-level impact of academic resilience and the dynamic interaction of individual strengths, school contexts, social/educational settings. Several key factors contribute to a student's ability to adapt at the individual level (Durlak *et al*., 2011; Rutter, 2012; Ungar, 2013; Masten, 2014; Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000). For example, students' attitudes toward learning and developing a growth mindset, as well as their ability to regulate their emotions and be self-efficacious, have all been identified as important predictors of resilience. The "Inner King" figurative metaphor indicates that supporting students in making their own choices or mastering themselves helps build their resilience for the challenges they will

face in life, but it emphasises that resilience should viewed as a process of active development and not just as a passive reaction (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). When looking at the meso- level, supportive climates of schools, the relationships between teachers and students, and fair policies in schools have all had an important role in building and enhancing the resilience of disadvantaged students. These findings also correlate with previous research which highlights the school as an engine for values, norms, and inclusion, further supporting the sociological dimension of resilience (OECD, 2019).

Importantly, school-level socio-economic composition was more likely to influence TIMSS outcomes, indicating that structural factors may interact differently in different studies and among different assessments. The evidence also supports a dynamic, systemic view of resilience: several students demonstrated resilience for both TIMSS and PISA and that this trait persisted by their adaptive capacities in the course of time and across domains.

These findings demonstrate the relevance of combining micro- (individual), meso- (school), and macro- (societal) perspectives and can lead to a conceptualization of education as a psychosocial laboratory in which the human, institutional and social dimensions interact to promote resilience (Thapa *et al*., 2013).

Continuing with the wider perspective of resilience in education that highlights the contributions of psychological, sociological, and social factors to the factors that shape students' adaptability and persistence in the learning process, this research looks at the well-being of educators and how they act as professionals in the school setting. If student resilience relies on intrinsic motivation, supportive structures, and surrounding social context, then teachers' intrinsic and identified motivation seems to be the major determinants of their engagement and overall well-being. Using a sample of 70 middle school teachers, this study explores the relationships among motivation, select personality traits – optimism, conscientiousness, and self-perception – and professional engagement and what psychological resources contribute to a resilient and flourishing learning environment. It is important to understand that supporting resilience among students has a direct relationship with enhancing teachers' well-being and engagement, resulting in a virtuous cycle for both educators and the students.

4. Summary of Findings

Results showing a relationship between different motivation/professional engagement (well-being) of teachers: a descriptive interpretation of the correlation and regression analysis (Seligman, 2011). Specifically:

- Intrinsic motivation showed a moderate, positive, and statistically significant correlation with engagement ($r = .547$, $p < .01$), indicating that

higher intrinsic motivation relates to greater levels of participation, and mental health and wellness at work;

- Identified motivation also positively and significantly correlated with engagement ($r = .431$, $p < .01$), which means that teachers who feel connected with the values they are trying to instil and enact are more likely to be engaged;
- External social regulation has a significant positive correlation with engagement ($r = .312$, $p < .01$), emphasizing the contribution of social-emotional regulation in maintaining professional well-being;
- Amotivation was not significantly correlated with engagement ($r = -.050$, $p > .05$), suggesting that the lack of motivation does not directly predict lower engagement in this sample.

These results imply that self-determined forms of motivation (intrinsic or identified) are the most direct predictors of engagement, while controlled motivation or amotivation have weaker direct effects, though they may influence engagement indirectly.

Personal traits:

- Optimism was positively associated and moderately correlated with engagement ($r = .209$, $p < .05$), which supports its position as a relevant predictor of well-being;
- Conscientiousness found a very weak, non-significant positive correlation ($r = .106$), and self-perception had a non-significant negative correlation ($r = -.176$), which suggests their relative contribution to the outcomes is limited.

Finally, a multiple linear regression analysis supported this hypothesis by confirming that intrinsic motivation is the biggest predictor of the extent to which this variable is engaged in a task, thus indicating the positive correlation of intrinsic motivation to professional well-being. There were also no statistically significant effects on introjected and extrinsic motivation or amotivation.

5. Conclusion

These results highlight the importance of cultivating intrinsic and identified motivation to promote teacher engagement and well-being, while personality characteristics such as optimism may reinforce the links.

Academic resilience is not solely an individual trait; it is a complex characteristic which is a product of many influences, including personal, institutional & societal factors. This research outlines that enhancing resilience requires holistic educational methods, which:

1. Nurture distinctive skills and abilities like a growth mindset, self-confidence, and the ability to manage one's feelings;

2. Build stronger schools by promoting positive school climates, high levels of inclusion, and fairly allocated resources to all learners;

3. Eliminate/reduce the barriers caused by inequity(poverty) through Systemic processes that restrict/potentially prohibit access to education or opportunity. These dimensions can help develop educational program designs that aid in preparing learners for overcoming adversities, building and creating a cohesive community, and enhancing community life in the long-term. Therefore, it will be critical to effectively implement policy interventions around individual and educational levels (structural supports) if we want to develop resilient learners (especially disadvantaged students) and establish a positive cycle of both individual resiliency through socially supported means and community resiliency through individual-supported means. Limitations Although the present study is informative on academic resilience at various levels, some limitations need to be mentioned;

4. Generalisability and sample scope: The research was conducted using a sample of the longitudinal TrEC study and cannot be considered representative or universal to educational systems in other countries. Resilience patterns are anticipated to be culturally, economically and politically determined by the various social contexts in which the experience of resilience occurs. Limitations of Measurement: TIMSS and PISA assessments used to assess students' academic resilience are designed to measure how well students perform in mathematics, science, and reading; they do not measure the dimensions of learning, creativity, or social-emotional ability. Also, self-report attitudes, growth mindsets, and emotional-regulation measures are vulnerable to response biases. This longitudinal study has chronological limitations because of its one-year lag time between the TIMSS (8th grade) assessment and the results of the PISA assessment. To assess the sustainability of resilience over various stages of education and in terms of lifetime outcomes, a longitudinal study with additional years of data is needed. There may be other unmeasured variables which could affect students' levels of resilience (e.g. opportunities for extracurricular activities and/or the quality of teaching) that were assessed in this study, but not taken into consideration as having a possible impact on the variance in outcomes for students' resilience. (E.g. the surrounding neighbourhood and its characteristics);

5. Causality: The study is observational and can detect associations but cannot establish definitive paths of causality between predictors and resilience. While it has some limitations, the current study gives strong evidence for the multimodal nature of academic resilience and provides practical insights into how individuals and systems can respond to academic resilience. In future research, researchers should consider doing cross-cultural research, take psychosocial/structural factors into account, and explore the long-term development of resilience beyond high school.

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Outdoor and Experiential Learning for Social Trust: Curriculum Strategies at the Intersection of Inclusive Education and Social Work

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Abstract. *As educators seek effective ways to develop stronger connections, to build inclusivity and more collaborative types of learning, outdoor and experiential learning are becoming increasingly significant. This study examines how experiential methodologies and outdoor activities may build social trust in learners, specifically within diverse/mixed-ability groups. The study reviews the literature from educational theory, social work, and social psychology regarding how cooperative learning experiences, nature-based activities, and group reflection may facilitate developing empathy, interdependence, and community among students. Additionally, the paper provides examples of how curriculum development can incorporate experiential components into daily teaching practices, thus creating opportunities for students to interact in less hierarchical and more open educational settings. It explores the teacher's role in shaping these experiences and creating the space for these activities.*

Keywords: *outdoor learning, experiential education, social trust, inclusive curriculum, community engagement.*

1. Introduction

Schools are some of the most important points of intervention, preventing social exclusion, and teaching kids how to develop skills for relational connections within a community from the viewpoint of social services. Over the last few years, interest in outdoor and experiential learning has increased as educators, social workers, and policymakers try to find environments in which to learn to encourage collaboration, trust, and active participation. Many of these methods are based on constructivist and humanistic approaches to understanding the process of learning, i.e. "Knowledge is constructed by individuals through direct experiences, reflection, and interacting meaningfully with others." (Kolb, 1984) The outdoor environment gives students more opportunities than traditional classroom lessons, i.e. more flexibility and spontaneity when interacting with classmates, participating in activities, and making friends (Beames, Higgins & Nicol, 2012). These interactions help develop empathy, active listening, and cooperative problem-solving, all of which are linked to the growth of social trust and group cohesion (Bandura, 1997; Putnam, 2000). Healthy societies recognize trust as a vital foundation for communities that include everyone. Inside educational institutions, relational trust determines the emotional environment of the

classroom while affecting how much students join in activities (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Through cooperative tasks and problem-solving in new places, outdoor learning experiences make situations where students depend on each other.

The respect between peers is helped by outdoor learning experiences because students must reach goals together. Many people believe that outdoor learning experiences strengthen how students relate to one another, which helps inclusive practices for individuals who feel ignored (Rickinson et al., 2004; Beames, Higgins & Nicol, 2012; Scrutton & Beames, 2015). The situation of building trust matters greatly for educational systems found in Central and Eastern Europe and Romania. In Romania, social inclusion remains a difficult task at both the level of educational institutions and the community. Since educational professionals see more diverse groups, new ways of teaching are required so that students feel supported. It has been observed that the need for better teaching methods is growing. These methods must encourage participation so that meaningful engagement happens among all learners.

The power of outdoor learning to build social trust is explored in this research in environments where everyone is included. Existing findings are reviewed in this paper to show a model built on theory. Experts claim that the educational professional has a major responsibility to make trust-building moments happen. This research gives new ideas to fields like social work and mental health because learning environments must become more collaborative. Social trust is improved when educational institutions become socially responsive to the needs of the students.

2. Literature Review

Outdoor and experiential learning has a long tradition of educational theory and practice that values action, group involvement, and personal initiative. Kolb's *Experiential Learning Theory* (1984) (Figure 1) remains a central reference in this field because it describes learning as a cycle involving concrete experience, reflection, conceptual understanding, and active experimentation. This model influenced a broad range of educational practices and continues to strengthen interpersonal relations and to promote inclusion.

We are seeing more and more proof that learning outside and going on adventures can really help kids develop socially and emotionally. Some researchers, like Hattie *et al*. (1997) reviewed studies and found that these kinds of programs can actually improve how well kids work together, feel good about themselves, and talk to each other. This is all connected to building trust with each other. Another group of researchers, Rickinson *et al*. (2004), reviewed a lot of studies on outdoor learning and found that spending time in nature can help kids work better as a team, be more resilient, and have stronger friendships.

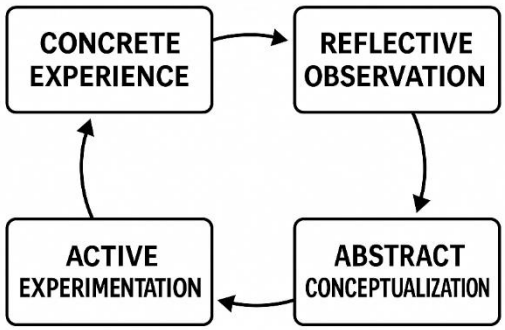

Figure 1. Kolb's *Experiential Learning Cycle* (adapted from Kolb, 1984)

Learning outside the classroom can be really powerful. Recent studies have shown that it can help build stronger relationships between students and teachers, and even create a sense of community in the classroom. For example, Swedish researchers found that outdoor lessons improved the way students and teachers interacted with each other, making the classroom a more positive and supportive place (Fägerstam & Blom, 2013). This is not just limited to Western Europe, but can also be applied to other parts of the world, like Central and Eastern Europe, where teachers are looking for ways to get their students more engaged and interested in learning. Outdoor learning can be especially helpful for students who have different learning needs or styles. It can help them feel more included and valued, and can even improve their overall well-being. In Denmark, for instance, researchers found that outdoor learning activities connected to the curriculum helped students feel more socially included and improved their mental health. Being in nature can be a great equalizer, allowing all students to participate and feel like they belong. Some researchers have also highlighted the importance of outdoor learning for emotional growth and development, particularly for students who may struggle in traditional classroom settings. By getting outside and experiencing nature, students can develop new skills and perspectives, and can even learn more about themselves and their place in the world. This can be especially true for students who need a more hands-on or experiential approach to learning that can help them develop a sense of confidence and self-worth. Overall, the benefits of outdoor learning are clear. It can help build stronger relationships, improve student engagement and inclusion, and even support emotional growth and development. By incorporating outdoor learning into our teaching practices, we can create a more supportive, inclusive, and effective learning environment for all students.

More and more people think that learning outside is important for building trust between people, which is necessary for working together and being part of a community. Some researchers, like Bryk & Schneider (2002), found that respect, being good at

something, and caring about others are key to building trust. When people work together and share experiences, these qualities can grow stronger. This idea is connected to bigger theories about how communities work and how people build relationships. One important thinker, Putnam (2000), says that trust grows when people interact with each other regularly and start to care about giving back to each other. Learning outside can provide lots of chances for this to happen, often in more active and participatory ways than traditional school settings. This is especially important in places like Romania, where schools are expected to help students not just learn academics, but also become part of their communities.

Taken together, these studies suggest that outdoor and experiential learning can create meaningful opportunities for trust-building, relationship development, and inclusive education. They also provide a strong basis for a conceptual model that explains how particular experiential processes may contribute to the development of social trust.

3. Methodology

This study uses a combination of conceptual and theoretical research to bring together existing knowledge and create a framework that explains how outdoor and experiential learning can help build social trust in inclusive learning settings. In the social sciences, researchers often use conceptual research to combine different theoretical views, understand how certain mechanisms work, or develop new models that can inform practice and guide future studies (OECD, 2019). This approach is particularly useful for a topic like this one, which spans multiple fields including education, social work, psychology, and community development. By taking a broader and more nuanced view, we can gain a deeper understanding of the issue than would be possible through a single empirical study. The goal is to develop a framework that can help us understand how outdoor and experiential learning can foster social trust in a way that is inclusive and beneficial for all learners.

To build trust, we need to understand how people learn from their experiences. We looked at some important ideas from experts like Kolb (1984), who talked about how we learn from doing things and reflecting on them. We also considered the work of Bryk & Schneider (2002), who studied how trust works in schools, and Putnam (2000), who thought about how social connections can help us work together. By combining these ideas, we got a better sense of how sharing experiences, working together, and thinking about what we have done can help us trust each other. This was the first step in my process, and it helped us figure out how trust can grow between people. We took a closer look at some studies on learning outside the classroom, making sure everyone feels included and helping kids develop social skills. We wanted to find out what keeps coming up in the research about how people interact with each other and build strong

communities. We focused on studies like the ones done by Hattie et al. (1997), carried out in 1997, 2004, and 2011. At the same time, we thought about how these findings might apply to the specific situation in Central and Eastern Europe. In Western Romania, teachers and social workers often have to deal with students who have very different needs and complex community relationships.

We built on the ideas from our research to create a model that focuses on working together, relying on each other, sharing challenges, feeling safe with others, and reflecting on what we do. This model is not meant to be tested with numbers, but rather to help us understand how learning through experience and outdoor activities can help build trust among people. It is a way of interpreting things and a starting point for more research in the future, both in Romania and around the world, to see if these ideas really work in different educational settings. As we went through this process, we took a step back to think about how the ideas and findings fit with the real-world challenges we have seen in higher education and social work training. This reflective approach is crucial in this kind of research because it keeps the model connected to both the theory and the practical experience, making sure it is aware of the context. By doing this, we aimed to create a model that is not just based on books, but also on what actually happens in the field. This way, the model can be more effective in addressing the issues that matter most.

4. Proposed Conceptual Model

In order to explain how outdoor and experiential learning environments can promote social trust in inclusive learning environments, this study will provide a conceptual framework based on the literature review. The paradigm combines outdoor education research (Hattie *et al*., 1997; Rickinson *et al*., 2004), relational trust theories (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), and experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984). Shared experiential challenge, cooperative problem-solving, relational safety, and reflective meaning-making are its four mutually reinforcing processes (Figure 2). These mechanisms are similar to practices seen in Romanian educational settings, where teachers frequently seek ways to improve cooperation and integration among various student groups, even if they are based on international research.

5. Shared Experiential Challenge

Students are, sometimes, placed in novel situations in outdoor and field courses, such as navigating unfamiliar natural settings, engaging in team-based mental or physical exercises, or working together to solve real-world problems. Participants in these situations must naturally coordinate their efforts and rely on one another. Research has shown that these shared challenges improve interdependence and group cohesion (Hattie *et al*., 1997). Practically speaking, when the process of building trust begins,

even low-intensity activities like building shelters out of natural materials, taking a low-ropes course, or conducting team fieldwork can result in instances of interdependence. When instructing college students, we have found that group challenges that do not overwhelm students can be effective in eliciting skills and weaknesses that students would not show in a traditional classroom to develop new relationships.

Figure 2. Conceptual model of mechanisms through which outdoor and experiential learning foster social trust

5.1. Collaborative Problem-Solving

When tasks are completed collaboratively, experiential learning is most effective. Students participate in the social interactions that foster mutual respect and trust as they assign responsibilities, pool resources, and organize their strategy. The typical hierarchies are frequently lessened in outdoor environments, making cooperation feel more equal and sincere. According to research, these settings promote shared decision-making and communication, both of which contribute to the development of social capital (Rickinson *et al*., 2004; Putnam, 2000). Small-group map reading, cooperative nature questions, and team tasks where each member contributes a certain talent are some examples. Through these exercises, students start to see each other as competent and trustworthy partners – a crucial component of relational trust.

5.2. Relational Safety and Supportive Communication

According to Bryk & Schneider (2002), trust develops when there is psychological safety, respect, and transparency. These conditions can be supported by outdoor learning, which provides a more casual and informal setting than a traditional classroom (Leather, 2018). Students frequently feel more at ease asking questions,

speaking up, and seeking support from their peers in such environments. According to Waite (2011), the informality of outdoor surroundings helps lessen the feeling of separation between educators and students, which is important for children who experience anxiety or marginalization in more traditional settings. In actuality, peer-supported assignments, group debriefings, and guided discussions during nature walks can all help foster an environment where kids feel respected, protected, and included – essential elements for developing trust.

5.3. Reflective Meaning-Making

It is reflection that transforms experience into knowledge. Kolb (1984) and other researchers contend that students require structured opportunities to make emotional and cognitive meaning of their experiences. Students might express how trust evolved or changed during group projects through reflection. Reflective journals, group conversations, storytelling, and peer feedback circles are examples of practices that might enhance comprehension and support the development of relationships (Thomas & Dyment, 2016). In our teaching, we have seen that straightforward reflection questions at the conclusion of an activity, like "When did you rely on someone today?" or "What helped you trust your group?" can provide insightful answers that enhance social awareness and shared responsibility.

5.4. Integrative Contribution to Inclusive Education

The strategies presented provide a powerful educational method for promoting inclusion and belonging when employed purposefully. Students with diverse origins, needs, and strengths can participate meaningfully in outdoor learning environments. Relational safety assists learners who are more vulnerable, shared obstacles can foster a sense of equality, cooperative tasks foster community, and reflection enhances empathy and understanding between people. According to Bølling *et al.* (2018), these settings may lessen social isolation and enhance well-being, which are definitely goals that are related to inclusive education and social work. Teachers can, therefore, use this conceptual model as a helpful foundation for creating experiential and outdoor learning activities. Although it draws on international literature, it is flexible enough to be adapted to local contexts, including Romanian schools and universities, where strengthening social trust remains an important goal of inclusive practice.

6. Discussion

This document illustrates a conceptual model which demonstrates how outdoor and experiential learning assists the growth of social trust in inclusive educational settings. Because these four processes are verified by global academic investigations, experts claim that the four processes recognized in the conceptual model – shared

challenge, collaborative problem-solving, relational safety, and reflective meaning-making – provide real benefits (Botterill & Platt, 2017). The worth of these processes becomes even more apparent when outdoor and experiential learning is viewed in connection to regular classroom operations.

For example, some schools in Romania have already started conducting activities similar to Școala Altfel (roughly *Schooling Differently*), with field trips focusing on nature, community clean-ups, and team-building initiatives outside. As a result, these activities provide students with various opportunities to work together as part of unfamiliar groups, negotiate different roles within the group, and rely on each other to accomplish objectives. They are often times found in outdoor activities in rural schools (short walks to a local area, forest explorations, outdoor science classes) allowing students to assist each other in following trail directions or responding to an environmental challenge. In the city, the use of courtyard-based group projects or workshops in sensory gardens has allowed students to communicate and eliminate social barriers that may otherwise exist among them when working together in traditional educational settings.

You can clearly see the impact that challenges shared with others can have when students engage in activities where they need to work as a group, such as completing a map-reading task in the hills near Arad, going on an outdoor orienteering experience or anything else where they are required to trust, coordinate, and be open to other members of their peer group. Teachers have also described how some students, who are normally very shy or anxious, tend to become more engaged when they participate in these types of activities outside of the classroom, so this type of experience has also been shown, in an existing body of research, to contribute to an increase in students' social confidence and connection with their peer group when they participate in challenge-based experiential activities.

Collaborative problems resolving can also be observed by doing a number of things together. Examples include building basic structures during a camping trip, making group presentations after field trips, and working on small-scale environmental restoration projects. Repeatedly participating in these types of activities increases the trust between individuals as described by Putnam (2000), which supports the position that outdoor education is a valuable opportunity for enhancing group cohesion.

Outdoor learning can create a sense of belonging. In Romania, many teachers report that students are more relaxed and engaged in conversations outside of the classroom. As a result, when they are on walks through the forest or during team building exercises or activities, formal authority structures tend to diminish which enables less socially confident or vulnerable students to feel comfortable speaking freely. Waite (2011) also found this to be true and highlighted the importance of informal social settings for inclusive teaching practices.

There are several easy ways to encourage students to reflect on their thinking through "Reflective Meaning-Making." During class, the teacher could ask students to talk about what they have learned about themselves and others through an outdoor task, or they could also have students identify when they felt supported by their peers. Reflection encourages an increased awareness of emotions and enhances relational learning that occurs during outdoor classes. These examples demonstrate that the conceptual framework discussed above is not just an abstract idea; it is a concrete way to support meaningful and practical student development in Romanian schools and universities, even if resources are limited (Gavrilă-Ardelean, 2021; Demeter *et al*., 2024).

7. Implications for Social Work Practice

The findings of this paper also matter more broadly for the field of social work, especially in relation to community engagement, group facilitation, and psychosocial development. Outdoor and experiential learning reflect many of the central principles of social work practice, including empowerment, participation, relationship-building, and strengths-based intervention. Activities that involve cooperation, mutual support, and reflective dialogue can help social work students develop key skills such as empathy, active listening, and group leadership. In community-based practice, experiential and outdoor approaches may also support vulnerable groups, encourage social inclusion, and strengthen resilience. For social workers in training, engagement with experiential methods offers not only academic learning but also practical insight into the ways shared experiences can build trust and cohesion within diverse groups (Payne, 2014).

8. Limitations and Future Research

The paper combines ideas from previous research, but it does not empirically evaluate the mechanisms. This is both a strength and a limitation. On the one hand, the model provides a clear framework for understanding how trust can grow through outdoor and experiential learning. However, we acknowledge that its significance may vary depending on the educational situation. Class size, teachers' willingness to use experiential methods, availability to outdoor settings, and broader cultural expectations can all influence how the approach works in practice. In our personal experience with kids and teachers in Romania, we have seen that some schools may struggle to integrate experiential or outdoor activities into everyday teaching. These realities suggest that even promising pedagogical ideas need to be adapted carefully to local conditions.

In the future, it would be interesting to investigate how these four identified mechanisms actually function within these projects. Research with the students, teachers, and social workers who participate in these types of activities can help to reveal how trust develops within these environments. It may also be interesting to compare

schools in urban areas of Romania to those in rural areas, or to compare Romanian schools to schools of similar demographics from different regions of the world. Furthermore, it would also be of interest to determine the impact that repeatedly participating in these types of activities has upon the trust and cohesion exhibited by the students within these groups. Overall, such research would allow for the development of suggestions regarding the best methods of creating

9. Conclusion

In this paper, the potential for outdoor and experiential learning to contribute to the development of social trust within inclusive educational settings has been examined through the lenses of experiential learning theory, theories of relational trust, and research on outdoor education. The conceptual model of outdoor and experiential learning that is presented in this paper indicates that four elements of such learning – elements like shared challenge, problem-solving, relational safety, and reflection – can contribute to the development of social trust between the students who participate in those outdoor and experiential learning activities. Furthermore, these elements are not to be considered separately from one another; instead, they are elements of a process that work together to create a trust relationship between the students.

The discussion emphasizes that outdoor and experience learning should be viewed as more than just another instructional approach. Education systems in Romania are still grappling with issues of school climate, involvement, and student engagement. In such environments, experiential approaches are likely to be effective in increasing involvement and relational resilience, though their impact may vary depending on how they are applied.

At the same time, the conceptual character of the model establishes distinct boundaries. Its practical efficacy will depend on how educators tailor experiential tactics to local situations, available resources, and cultural expectations.

School infrastructure, access to outdoor places, and instructors' confidence in conducting experiential activities all have the potential to influence outcomes. As a result, further empirical study is needed, both in Romanian schools and elsewhere, to investigate how these mechanisms work in practice and how learners experience trust-building processes in various contexts (Bostan & Gavrilă-Ardelean, 2023).

Despite these limitations, the paper highlights various practical consequences. Educators and social workers can create outdoor tasks that foster cooperation, set up routines that promote relational safety, and incorporate brief but organized reflection into field-based learning. Such approaches do not always require significant expenditures. In many circumstances, short, carefully facilitated activities might be sufficient to promote inclusion and build trust. For teacher education programs and colleges such as those of Aurel Vlaicu University of Arad, the model may provide a

beneficial framework for preparing future professionals to apply experiential approaches in socially responsive ways.

Acknowledgement

In the writing of this paper, AI has been used exclusively for the purpose of translating and refining the final version of the text. The scientific content, argumentative structure, and interpretations presented belong entirely to the authors. All suggestions generated by the AI have been critically analysed, verified and validated by the authors, who assume full responsibility for the accuracy, originality and integrity of the works.

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Psychopedagogical Interventions with an Impact on Students' Performance and Emotional Balance

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Abstract. *The purpose of this paper is to show that kids need emotional help in addition to educational help from schools. Students do best when they feel good, therefore, the focus is on how to support students during school counselling. Different ways to achieve this are helping students deal with stress and anxiety about tests, learning how to manage their emotions, and being motivated to learn instead of just trying to achieve a grade. There are practical examples included in the paper, including relaxation techniques, emotional regulation strategies, and positive thinking methods that are appropriate for middle-school students of varying ages. The paper also discusses the significance of a school counsellor and how parents and teachers can work together to assist their students. The study's purpose was to investigate how these types of student intervention programs improve academic performance and the positive effect they have on creating an environment for students to learn that fosters trust, assistance, and emotional well-being.*

Keywords: *emotional well-being, stress management, resilience, inclusion, school counselling.*

1. Introduction

In recent years, the education system has been affected by many social developments, advances in digital technology and growing expectations for what teachers should teach and how they should teach it. Many benefits have accrued to the education system from these changes, but there has also been a corresponding increase in students experiencing emotional difficulties. Stress, anxiety about tests, and a lack of motivation to learn are among the many challenges students face today. If you have ever experienced these challenges, you may know the impact they can have on your ability to focus, remember things, and complete tasks. Studies show that these emotional concerns can limit your academic success through their negative effects on your ability to focus, memorize things, and complete assignments. The definition of success in school is, now, moving away from just focusing on academic success (test scores and grades) to thinking of success in terms of the whole person by including emotional health and well-being (like feeling high or low in mood) (Seligman, 2011). In this kind of mindset, more emphasis is being put on the need for school counsellors, who give students essential guidance related to emotional issues, motivation, and their social development. Counsellors in schools use psycho-pedagogical interventions to help

students identify their emotions, manage their academic stress, and develop coping strategies to meet their educational and personal needs. The psycho-pedagogical interventions offered by school counsellors are especially important to students during middle school, when students are at a particularly vulnerable point in their emotional development, exploring their identities, and facing increased pressure to succeed academically.

This paper examines how psycho-pedagogical strategies can help students develop their emotional regulation and also boost school productivity. To accomplish this, we will consider current research in psychology (including applied psychology), social work and school counselling to provide a theoretical frame of reference for the study; a range of intervention and support models as well as the various ways that psycho-pedagogical interventions are delivered in school settings (systematically). By integrating the theories and applied practices of school counselling together we will demonstrate that systematic psycho-pedagogical interventions will not only improve student's grades, but also provide an environment of 'trust', 'collaboration,' and 'emotional safety' for students.

2. Emotional Balance, Academic Performance, and Resilience

Adolescent mental health is recognized as a global priority by the World Health Organization (2022), with half of all mental health conditions occurring before age 14. Likewise, UNESCO (2023) has also called for a focus on well-being in educational systems not just as part of the learning process but as a prerequisite to learning.

Emotional stability refers to a person's ability to perceive, grasp, and control their feelings effectively. Emotional regulation is tied closely with the executive functions of attention management, working memory, and cognitive adaptability; therefore, when a student is under stress or anxious, they cannot concentrate as effectively on school activities due to being distracted by their emotional state, which hinders their ability to learn efficiently at school.

Research in educational psychology emphasizes that emotion's role in the learning process is not simply separate from cognition, but rather works together with and can aid or impede cognition's ability to learn. That is, for example, how academic emotions, such as enjoyment, anxiety, pride, or frustration, affect student engagement, persistence, and performance. In the case of test anxiety, for instance, we know that it can disrupt working memory and problem-solving capabilities, particularly in evaluation situations. As test anxiety increases, so does the crowding of working memory and, therefore, less cognitive resources are available towards problem-solving. The previous example illustrates that, even though a student possesses above-average cognitive capabilities, they may not achieve to their potential because of inadequate emotional self-regulation, essentially showing that there is no substitute for strong

emotional self-regulation; likewise, intelligence cannot compensate for lack of emotional self-regulation. An example of this concept can be explained through architecture, whereby emotion is not a weather phenomenon that occasionally interferes with cognition's building process; emotions are part of cognition's foundation for future learning. A student who is experiencing anxiety during an examination has two separate thought processes working against each other: one, his/her attempt to solve the problem; two, his/her attempt to monitor perceived threats and rehearse worst-case scenarios. As I explain this concept to teachers – a student that is overwhelmed with fear of failing uses valuable cognitive resources to manage their fears, leaving insufficient cognitive bandwidth to complete the academic task. Consequently, interventions designed to promote emotional regulation do not take away from the students' ability to learn; rather, they serve as a restorative process for learning skill development. However, a moderate level of jitters can promote performance by increasing alertness. The outcome of a psycho-pedagogical intervention is not emotional neutrality but rather emotional regulation – the ability to modulate affective intensity so it will facilitate cognitive engagement.

One of the more recent concepts seen in research is "academic buoyancy", or the ability of students to effectively manage daily academic setbacks, such as receiving poor grades, experiencing high levels of pressure during exams, or finding themselves receiving negative feedback from peers. Academic buoyancy is considered different than academic resilience, as it does not necessarily refer to an individual overcoming major obstacles in life but, instead, addresses daily challenges that virtually all student face throughout their educational experience. Research establishes that students that are emotionally balanced can build higher degrees of academic buoyancy and tend to develop better coping strategies, be highly motivated, and have a much steadier academic path than those who are not (Martin & Marsh, 2008).

From a social service perspective, emotional regulation has societal context from an environmental viewpoint (family, friends, and educational setting). A strong relationship with a teacher/counsellor acts as a protective factor from stressful situations and supports healthy coping mechanisms. Research indicates there is a correlation between the degree of emotional attachment a student feels towards his/her school and factors such as increased participation in school, lower degrees of emotional stress, and improved academic outcomes. As such, emotional health should be viewed and understood through the relational lens and systemic nature of support, rather than as an attribute based solely on the individual. Therefore, from my experience as a counsellor, academic resilience is not an individual characteristic but is highly relational. The ability of students to persevere and rebound from a low mark is determined by multiple factors in addition to their self-efficacy, including how the teacher reacted to the student's grade. *Was it disappointment or was it curiosity? Did the parent's reaction frame the student's*

grade as a failure or did they provide feedback? Did the student's peers normalize struggles or did their peers stigmatize them? Ultimately, buoyancy is a characteristic of the student-in-context – not just the individual student – which is the rationale for an integrative, systems approach.

Resilience within this framework refers to the dynamic process by which an individual develops positive adaptations through considerable stress or adversity. When considering resilience in terms of the school environment, skills such as developing social support networks, competency regarding emotions, and ability to find solutions to problems are included in this definition. Studies indicate that, rather than being considered a personality trait, resilience is an ability that can be built and strengthened through conscious use of educational practices or psycho-pedagogical methods.

According to this theoretical framework, academic performance, emotional equilibrium, and resilience are interrelated student developmental areas. Successful psycho-pedagogical interventions designed to address all three domains can be achieved through enhancing a student's emotional regulation, improving coping strategies, and promoting collaborative learning environments.

3. Psycho-Pedagogical Intervention Models in School Counselling

School counselling psycho-pedagogical interventions are organized actions intended to assist students in their academic, emotional, and social aspects of life. Current methods of intervention utilize a prevention-oriented model by focusing on early intervention and skill development rather than providing remedial assistance when a crisis occurs. Cognitive-behavioural interventions, frameworks of Social-Emotional Learning, and practices derived from Positive Psychology are examples of some of the most evidence-based models.

CBT's (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy) popularity has also led to the development of CBT interventions for use in schools. The majority of the research supporting the efficacy of using CBT improvements to help decrease the symptoms of anxiety/stress and, thus, reduce the cognitive (thought) distortion associated with school-based performance is strong. In a school context, CBT-based interventions primarily focus on assisting students to identify negative automatic thoughts associated with failing (e.g. fear of failing/catastrophizing, etc.), modifying or changing the distortions, and replacing them with more accurate and functional beliefs about themselves.

Psych-educational strategies enhance students' understanding of coping with their emotions and responding to stress. Educating on the body's response to anxiety and thought processes about anxiety helps evening out emotion and lessen the feeling of self-blame. In addition to the cognitive strategies, including relaxation techniques (i.e.

slow, diaphragmatic breathing, and progressive muscle relaxation) help increase the students' perceived control over their responses to anxiety and the sense of self-efficacy.

Several research studies conducted together show the results of multiple CBT interventions in schools reduced test anxiety and emotional distress significantly, and academic engagement and performance moderately improved. (Durlak *et al*., 2011) Thus, it is important that adolescents receive these interventions consistently and adapted for their developmental levels.

The Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) frameworks serve as another defining component of psycho-pedagogical interventions. The goal is to teach five primary areas of competency: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, which relate directly to the regulation of emotions and relationships between peers, as well as academic motivation.

Current studies show that SEL programs can help develop students' positive feelings about themselves at school and that the best results are accomplished through integrating SEL into daily classroom activities. Another form of SEL is using Positive Psychology Interventions (PPI), which emphasize using your strengths, believing in yourself, and being intrinsically motivated. As a counsellor, I use exercises based on gratitude, identify students' strengths, and help them create goals to help them develop intrinsic motivation instead of being driven by performance anxiety. When students are engaged in goal setting using various gratitude exercises and learning about developing a growth mindset, they will be able to see these types of challenges as an opportunity to learn and grow rather than viewing them as a threat to their self-esteem.

There are too many instances where school counsellors execute school-based programs in separate segments; e.g. they have performed CBT groups here, placed SEL curriculums there, had "gratitude week" sessions as a way of utilizing positive psychology, etc. I submit that the three aforementioned evidence-based frameworks work together best when placed into a single integrated approach/system where they serve a specific, interconnected role. For example, when school personnel use CBT techniques in combination with SEL and positive psychology methods, the positive outcomes that the school personnel achieve through their intervention will be more sustainable over time as opposed to using them separately as individual programs. This type of integrative model aligns with the current trends in the field of school counselling that support a holistic, strength-based, developmentally appropriate practice approach.

4. Practical Intervention Strategies for Emotional Balance and Academic Performance

Accessible, adaptable and relevant psycho-educational interventions are typical of effective psycho-educational interventions for students' learning through experience (school). When using psychosocial/educational interventions in a school setting, the

interventions should be developmentally appropriate, efficient, and easily adaptable to classroom situations. This section includes examples of practical strategies that have been shown to improve emotional control, stress management, and academic engagement.

Among the top emotional challenges that students face are stress and anxiety. These challenges are more common for students in grades 6-8. As a result, school-based programs have shifted significantly towards implementing prevention-based programs designed to help students develop coping strategies prior to facing serious stress or anxiety issues. Some studies show that short structured therapies (e.g. breathing exercises, guided relaxation, grounding techniques) are effective in decreasing both physiological arousal and attentional focus in evaluative situations.

In the past few years, there has been an increasing amount of interest in using mindfulness-based practices as part of educational settings. The focus of these practices is on being aware of one's own thoughts and feelings as they occur in the present moment, along with accepting them without judgment. Mindfulness-based programs that have been implemented within schools have been linked to decreased levels of stress and anxiety, as well as some evidence of improved academic achievement and the ability to regulate emotions. Additionally, the techniques used during mindfulness-based programs have been determined to be more effective if they are automatically incorporated into day-to-day school activities, rather than delivered in a separate program (Zenner, Herrnleben-Kurz, & Walach, 2014).

A counselling group for students allows for identification of personal stressors through assessments, as well as development of individualized coping strategies. Some of these strategies may include a pre-test routine, cognitive reframing technique, and a post-examination reflection to help alleviate fear of failing and increase perceived control.

Self-regulation of feelings is vital to achieve your own potential. Teaching students how to identify their emotions, accurately describe how they feel, and use effective coping methods are part of psycho-educational programs designed for improving students' ability to regulate themselves. In the cognitive restructuring process, as identified in cognitive-behavioural theory, students can examine their beliefs about their capacity for success in school and their self-esteem.

Students who perceive errors or mistakes as a reflection of their personal failure tend to experience feelings of emotional disconnection and distress in general. By using various forms of guided counselling to assist students in changing how they perceive errors/mistakes into a learning opportunity (i.e. changing their mindset), it creates the potential for the development of a growth-oriented mindset. Research has shown that students who have developed adaptive cognitive appraisals possess greater persistence to continue working, lower levels of anxiety and experience better academic success

(Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Here are some case studies from the school counselling office illustrating how these techniques work.

Case Study 2: A student in 6th grade, 12 years old, was referred because his grades suddenly fell by approximately 37% after 3 months of good grades. The assessment showed that he did not have learning disabilities, and his cognitive was above average. His perfectionism was rigid in nature – anything short of maximum was seen as total failure. The belief had not been challenged at elementary school where he was obtaining perfect grades (100) and, therefore, became unmanageable when he started middle school. I invested 3 sessions in developing relational trust through SEL informed approaches of emotion labelling, active listening, and validation without premature correction. Next, we collaboratively explored his automatic thought ("if I received a 9 instead of a 10, I am mediocre") and examined it with evidence using the metaphor of a scientist's notebook; failed attempts provide the best evidence. Finally, a strengths assessment demonstrated that the student possessed a high level of analytical ability and a curiosity that were both overshadowed by his desire to obtain grades. The student had 8 sessions of therapy, while the teacher was consulted in parallel to the therapeutic process to assist in changes to the student's grades and to shift the student's relationship with evaluations from one of being threatened to one of using evaluations to gather information.

Case Study 2: A 13-year-old girl in 7th grade was referred after a peer noticed her not talking to anyone anymore. The student had not been noted as having any behavioural problems. In fact, she was quiet, compliant, and averaged with her grades. Assessments indicated she had become socially withdrawn because of a generalized, evaluative anxiety (beyond academics). This student feared being judged to be unintelligent if she answered a question incorrectly. This fear caused her to withdraw from participating in class and to ultimately reduce her social connections, increasing her anxiety and perpetuating this cycle in a manner that left little evidence of her emotional distress because her behaviours were not causing disruption. CBT-based interventions focused on helping her examine the validity of her belief that "if I say something wrong, everyone thinks I'm stupid." The student was also placed in a structured peer mentoring role. This case demonstrates the critical insight that students who are in most need of intervention are often least likely to be identified because the distress is exhibited through withdrawal rather than disruption.

Case Study 3: In this case, a 14-year-old boy experienced overwhelming physical symptoms when he was anxious to take an exam. His symptoms included a racing heart, nausea, shaking hands, and a "buzzing" sensation in his body that made it difficult for him to read the exam questions. He had already seen a counsellor, who had only taught him relaxation techniques as a way to relieve the physical symptoms but did not help him change his core belief that he would majorly disappoint his parents if he

failed at school and that he would fail at the exam. Educating him about the fight-or-flight response as an instinctual protective mechanism that is responding inappropriately to a non-dangerous stimulus was much more effective than simply teaching him relaxation techniques. We were able to use cognitive restructuring to change his core beliefs, and we developed a pre-exam routine for him that integrated mindfulness breathing with a self-affirmation statement based on some of his personal strengths.

Although this case was very individual, it was very important to include a session with the parents to discuss how the perceived pressure to achieve (including agency to be responsible for them) was coming from the family system. Emotional experiences can be made more common and provide support for peers through the use of intervention strategies that are implemented in groups. The use of a structured counselling group to share emotional coping strategies helps to build social relationships and reinforces modelling and feedback of emotional learning.

5. The Role of the School Counsellor in Promoting Resilience and Inclusion

The responsibilities of school counsellors include both creating psycho-pedagogical interventions aimed at creating emotional balance in students and helping them develop an interest in school. In addition to working with students on an individual basis, they provide prevention programs, work with teachers, and support families. School counsellors enhance students' resilience by promoting protective factors in their environment. Counselling that promotes resilience concentrates on the student's strengths, their coping resources, and their ability to adapt. Instead of solely focusing on risk factors or deficits, counsellors assist the student to find their previous accomplishments and develop supportive relationships and personal capabilities. This strength-based method is congruent with modern social work values and enhances inclusive education practices. Counsellors help with the delivery of special support services by modifying their approach according to individual profiles for all students (with disabilities and emotional vulnerabilities). When working with students within the context of special education, it is imperative that ethical standards are adhered to. This means taking into consideration the cultural background as well as developmental and contextually relevant factors when planning – which ultimately assures that students are treated with respect and equity through providing inclusive practices (including counselling) – will increase the student's feeling of belonging and decrease the likelihood they will be isolated/marginalized. Collaboration with families and teachers as a protective factor collaboration between school counsellors, families, and teachers maximizes the effectiveness of psycho-educational interventions. It also strengthens a student's emotional balance and resilience by providing students with consolidated support and messages if family, counsellor, and teacher efforts are aligned. The involvement of families in their child's development has also been highlighted as a

primary protective factor for emotional and academic growth. The way that parents raise their kids can affect the coping styles they use because of how they model emotions, communication style, and learning and evaluation. School guidance counsellors can facilitate parent involvement through psycho-educational workshops, individual guidance sessions, and the use of resources that support learning emotional regulation and managing stress. The parent who asks "What grade did you get?" sends a different message than the parent who asks "What did you learn today?" One of the things I do is running workshops for parents that teach them how to focus on praising their kids for effort rather than ability (following Carol Dweck's concept of growth mindset). Research suggests that family-based approaches to children will lead to a higher level of not only emotional adjustment and academic motivation, as well as to help support positive behaviours in the children. In order to shape how the classroom feels, teachers utilize emotionally supportive teaching techniques. Positive feedback (such as acknowledgement of correct answers), clearly defined expectations, and respectful communication are examples of how teachers foster a supportive environment where students feel safe and comfortable to fully participate. In addition, when teachers and counsellors work together, social-emotional learning as part of the more formalized school curriculum becomes a part of what students learn every day. Measurements for success related to psycho-pedagogy interventions include quantitative data such as grades or attendance, as well as qualitative data derived from student self-reports and overall emotional mood. Some of the more commonly reported outcomes include a reduction in anxiety symptoms, improvements in the ability to regulate emotions, an increased sense of motivation, and an increase in the student's ability to engage academically. Although standardized measures can provide some quantifiable data that are valuable, qualitative results obtained through observation or self-report provide an equally informative means of assessing overall emotional well-being and change.

6. Conclusions

This paper highlights the importance of psycho-pedagogical interventions in achieving emotional balance and academic achievement for students. I support a holistic, integrative approach to education through evidence-based and school counselling practices that emphasize emotional well-being as an important aspect of the learning process. Intervening with a structured approach to psychological education helps students produce better grades and have the skills needed to be resilient and emotionally competent when facing both educational and social obstacles. The general implications resulting from this information highlight the necessity for institutions, both from a policy and financial/compliance standpoint to help support educators through professional development and incorporate emotional learning into education. In conclusion, my professional or a personal viewpoint. My experiences teach me that

during my twenty years teaching; students show their true emotions when they are learning. Providing this type of education helps every student build a healthy emotional state, allows them to feel safe learning, and helps them understand what safety means to them.

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Role of the School Social Worker in Preventing Psychotic Crises in Students

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Abstract. *This paper aims to identify possible factors involved in triggering psychotic disorders in children, based on specialized studies. The main objective is to identify these risk factors, explain how psychotic disorders are defined in DSM-5, and highlight the role of school social workers in prevention and intervention activities. Research results show that psychotic disorders in children can be influenced by biological and genetic, psychological, environmental and educational factors, the last risk factor being the phenomenon of bullying, which affects both the emotional balance and the psychological development of children.*

Keywords: *school social worker, bullying, risk factors, psychotic disorder, prevention.*

1. Introduction

Psychotic disorder represents the process of moving from conscious to unconscious (American Psychiatric Association, 2016). People who suffer from such a disorder often remain stuck in a distortion of reality, with the main elements being delusions, hallucinations, disorganized thinking, disorganized motor behaviour, and other negative symptoms that are associated with schizophrenia such as decreased emotional expressiveness and anhedonia. The onset of this condition begins in adolescence or young adulthood. The neuropsychiatric effects of COVID-19 include sudden psychotic onset in people who have never had a mental illness before. For example, people have been identified who were affected by the virus and who experienced severe psychotic symptoms, such as hallucinations and delusions, even when they did not have typical COVID-19 symptoms, such as fever or cough. This means that the disease could affect the central nervous system in a direct or indirect way, possibly through immune and inflammatory means (Brahmi *et al*., 2021). In addition, experts have stated that prolonged stress, collective worry, and social isolation caused by the pandemic may be the reasons why vulnerable people, such as adolescents and young adults, develop psychotic illnesses in time (St. Victor *et al*., 2022; Harrison & Taquet, 2023).

Analysing the mental health situation in Romania, it can be seen that the population aged 0-18 exceeds 4 million children, representing approximately 21% of the total population. Of these, almost 9% need mental health services annually. Studies show that the psychological well-being of Romanian children and adolescents is

significantly more affected than the average in other countries. Thirty-three percent of adolescents aged 11-15 reported feeling sad frequently, a percentage much higher than the international average of 13%, according to data from the World Health Organization (2020).

A national study conducted in 2020 on a sample of over 10,000 adolescents with an average age of 17 showed that almost half (48.9%) had suicidal thoughts at least once, 27.1% reported a persistent state of sadness, and 21.5% had depressive episodes in the past six months. It is worrying that the suicide rate among adolescents and young people under the age of 15 is higher than the European average (Copăceanu & Costache, 2020). UNICEF (2023) shows that many mental health problems start early, with about half of them appearing before the age of 15, and most of the rest appearing in early adulthood. The most common difficulties faced by students are behavioural and attention disorders, anxiety, autism spectrum disorders, depression, school anxiety, and eating disorders (Copăceanu & Costache, 2020).

These data highlight the scale of mental health problems among young people and show the need for early and coordinated interventions. In this context, the research question is outlined: *What is the role of the school social worker in preventing psychotic crises in students?* From this question, the following objectives are derived: identifying these risk factors, explaining how psychotic disorders are defined in DSM-5, and highlighting the role of school social workers in prevention and intervention activities.

Understanding these aspects can contribute to the development of clearer and more effective interventions in schools, in which the school social worker plays an active role in preventing and managing risk situations.

2. Risk Factors for Psychotic Disorder in Children

Before examining cases of brief psychotic disorder with and without symptoms of schizophrenia, we need to review the main factors that determine the occurrence of psychotic disorder and, how else, if not with its onset in childhood.

Family history of schizophrenia and premorbid neurological problems are key risk variables that affect the course of the disease, according to research conducted by Bohuș, Lupu & Micluția (2014). The study also shows that disorganized families can worsen the disease and that there is a correlation between prenatal problems and IQ level, although the correlations are weak. Among other risk factors, there are *complications of pregnancy and childbirth, premorbid neurological problems – motor and language retardation and coordination deficiencies, hereditary variables and family history, low IQ.*

Risk factors in psychotic disorder are analysed by several researchers in the field such as: research conducted by Scherr *et al*. (2012) demonstrated that negative life circumstances, such as death or divorce in the family, can worsen schizophrenia. The

study's conclusions reveal a link between *family disorganization* and the evolution of the disease. *Neglect, abuse, and trauma* can cause catatonia or other conditions, which raises some questions. Early *neglect*, *stress* and *trauma* can cause mental and medical illnesses through *endocrine, immunologic, electro-physiologic, cognitive* and *structural changes* of the *brain*. Taking into account the overlap between artistic and catatonic symptoms, young children with autism are also affected (Dhossche, Ross & Stoppelbein, 2012). *Developmental deviation and abnormalities in social interaction and language-related functions serve to accelerate the onset of schizophrenia at an earlier age* (Vourdas *et al*., 2023). Another study conducted by Zammit *et al*. (2007) confirms that *childhood trauma* can be a trigger for schizophrenia and other mental illnesses. *Genetic factors: psychosis or mood disorders such as major depression or bipolar disorder in the family*. *Brain and neurotransmitter disorders Early traumas can alter dopaminergic and hippocampal function, causing schizophrenia.* Chronic stress activates the microglia (central nervous system cells), which can amplify inflammatory responses and damage brain regions linked to psychosis. Obesity and inflammation*:* adipocytes *(fat cells) produce inflammatory markers, and obesity, which can be linked to chronic stress, is linked to low level inflammation.* These variables can affect stress response and can cause psychotic disorders. Among the main known factors of psychotic disorders are *OBGYN interventions, childhood abuse, migration, urban life, negative life experiences, cannabis use, poor nutrition* (Murray, David & Ajnakina, 2021). Lack of prenatal vitamins like c*holine, folic acid, and vitamin D* can cause psychotic illnesses, including schizophrenia. (Freedman *et al*., 2022) Another study links obstetrics with schizophrenia, *complications during pregnancy such as: hypoxia of the foetus, maternal stress, relationship between genes and the environment:* if the mother is genetically predisposed to perinatal complications there are chances that the foetus will develop a schizophrenic disorder, also if the mother has a family history of schizophrenia, a caesarean birth where there is a risk of hypoxia or other complications, especially if the mother is genetically predisposed (Mittal, Ellman & Cannon, 2008).

3. Psychotic Disorders in the Educational Context

In the educational context, bullying is the main factor that triggers tensions between students, emotional problems, decreased school performance and, in some cases, social exclusion, because a student who is isolated, labelled, humiliated, compared or even physically assaulted repeatedly and intentionally, with the aim of demonstrating his inferiority, gradually loses his self-confidence and sense of security. In these conditions, the student may be predisposed to emotional disorders which can accentuate in time, to the point in which his mental state and perception of reality start to deteriorate, presenting the risk of the triggering of a psychotic disorder.

The relationship between bullying and self-esteem associated with psychotic episodes studied by Cabrera-Cuevas, Barragán-Campos & Gómez-Díaz (2025), links bullying, self-esteem and the appearance of psychotic symptoms in Mexican adolescents. The study confirms previous findings that low self-esteem increases the risk of psychosis. High self-esteem may protect against the risk of psychosis, especially if early treatments increase it. Researchers also recommend supporting the development of self-confidence in children and adolescents to reduce the risk of psychotic disorders in adulthood, as low self-esteem is closely linked to bullying.

Another study highlights that students who have been subjected to prolonged bullying experience high rates of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), insomnia, and emotional/behavioural problems. In other words, psychological risks are exacerbated by the severity of the abuse (Zhao *et al*., 2023).

In their article, Han *et al*. (2025) highlight the fact that bullying has severe repercussions on the adolescents: depression, anxiety, and even self-harm tendencies, affecting not only the victims but also the aggressors.

4. Considerations Regarding Acute Polymorphic Psychotic Disorder with and without Symptoms of Schizophrenia (APA, 2016)

Diagnosing and classifying schizophrenia-like symptoms in patients with acute polymorphic psychotic illness involves:

4.1. Characteristics

Rapid Onset. It only takes a few days or weeks to pass for the psychotic symptoms to manifest.

Variety in symptoms. The patient may encounter a range of psychotic symptoms at different times, and these symptoms may fluctuate or vary. The duration of symptoms is one day or less, but not more than thirty days.

4.2. Symptoms of Acute Polymorphic Psychotic Illness

Hallucinations, distorted perceptions, most commonly manifested in auditory (the impression of voices) or visual (the perception of non-existent images) form.

Delusion, a false belief (e.g. the idea of persecution of a feeling or inflated self-importance).

Problems with organizing thought, manifesting through incoherent or unclear speech.

Symptoms of disorganization or catatonia, including inappropriate actions, severe agitation, lack of reaction, atypical gait, or complete inactivity.

4.3. Presence of Symptoms of Schizophrenia

No symptoms related to schizophrenia: It is not necessary to have a history of schizophrenia to experience a psychotic disorder. Reality and thoughts are not persistently disrupted.

Affected by symptoms of schizophrenia: Symptoms such as persistent delusions or hallucinations may be present, but do not last long enough to meet the criteria for schizophrenia.

4.4. Possible Diagnostic Options

Exclusion of other causes: Establishing a causal relationship between symptoms and substance use (alcohol, drugs), medication side effects, or other medical problems (neurological diseases, brain injuries, etc.) is essential.

4.5. Depressive or Bipolar Disorders with Psychotic Features

It is important to rule out major depressive disorder (MDD) or bipolar disorder (BPD) with psychotic features, as these conditions may have symptoms in common with hallucinations and delusions.

4.6. Treatment

Pharmaceutical: Antipsychotics are usually prescribed to relieve symptoms.

Stress management, reducing anxiety and acquiring coping skills are all goals of psychotherapy, which includes cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and other types of treatment.

Each category of psychotic disorders in the DSM-5 has its own characteristics:

Schizophrenia – symptoms include hallucinations, delusions, speech disorders, catatonia, and flat affect.

Schizophreniform disease – symptoms similar to those of schizophrenia, but of a lesser duration. (1-6 months)

Affective schizophrenia – maniacal or depressive symptoms with psychotic symptoms, including hallucinations or delusions.

Short-term psychosis – an acute psychotic episode lasting at least one day but less than one month.

Delusional disorder – one or more delusions for at least one month, without accompanying psychotic symptoms.

Drug-induced psychosis – drug or alcohol withdrawal can cause psychosis.

Psychosis caused by another illness – medical conditions such as brain injuries, epilepsy, and acute infections produce hallucinations and delusions.

Catatonia – it can be part of other psychotic illnesses or it can occur alone. Motor immobility, mutism, excessive negativism, repetitive movements and stereotypy are symptoms.

5. Role of the School Social Worker

The school social worker's first intervention is primary prevention, which involves identifying students prone to deterioration in their mental state. This is achieved through effective communication with teachers and by applying psychosocial tests to identify the triggering factors of psychotic disorders. At the same time, the social worker contributes to the prevention of harassment by organizing inclusion activities, communication sessions, and personal development workshops. As a secondary prevention measure, he/she collaborates closely with the student's family, offering counselling sessions in which both the student and the parents benefit from psycho-education to improve coping and cognitive strategies, identify stressful stimuli, and reduce their impact. The social worker also provides advice to teachers on the necessary adjustments for the student, in order to reduce stress factors and maintain emotional balance (Early, 2019; Stevens & Prince, 2012).

In tertiary prevention, school social workers help with the recovery and reintegration of students with severe psychotic and emotional disorders. The intervention consists of monitoring the student's socio-emotional development, collaborating with the school psychologist and specialist doctor and informing the family. The main objective is to help the student integrate into school, reduce the recurrence of symptoms, and provide school, family, and psychological support.

A school social worker, in the intervention stage, collaborates closely with the family to identify early stressors that may aggravate or trigger a relapse of a psychotic episode. Parental counselling is done with tact and empathy, to avoid emotional overload and to provide them with real support, not additional pressure. Also, the child's medication treatment should not be interrupted except on the recommendation of a specialist.

As previously noted, sometimes the triggering factor for psychotic disorder can be the family environment. In such situations, the intervention involves parental and social counselling, and when it is found that the student is at risk or requires protection, the school social worker has the role of identifying and mobilizing the available human and institutional resources available to support the family. Sometimes, the simple active presence of the social worker is enough for the student and family to feel supported, and when they ask for help, prompt intervention becomes essential.

Another important direction of intervention is collaboration with the community. Centres, therapists, or psychiatrists can be identified near the school or in the city that can help support children diagnosed with psychotic disorders. These

disorders can generate inappropriate behaviours not because of lack of willpower, but because of real difficulties in emotional and cognitive regulation. Therefore, it is important to carefully monitor the student's behaviour and to constantly collaborate with teachers and other students to facilitate the child's integration into the collective. This can prevent stigmatization and negative labelling, which could further worsen the child's condition.

6. Conclusion

The role of the school social worker in supporting students with psychotic disorders is based on prevention and collaboration. Through the three stages of interventions – primary, secondary, and tertiary – he helps to identify difficulties early, support the student and family, and maintain contact with mental health professionals. These actions facilitate the student's accommodation to the school environment, reduce the risk of symptom recurrence, and support the building of a stable and safe educational environment.

Regarding the onset of psychotic disorder in childhood, it is the result of several factors:

- **Biological and genetic factors**:
  - *Biological factors: medical history regarding schizophrenia and premorbid neurological problems; endocrine, immunological, electrophysiological, cognitive and structural changes in the brain, regarding schizophrenia and neurological problems; motor and language retardation and coordination deficits, low IQ, brain and neurotransmitter disorders;*
  - *Chemical imbalances: early trauma can alter dopaminergic and hippocampal function, causing schizophrenia. Adipocytes (fat cells) produce inflammatory markers, and obesity, which can be caused by chronic stress, is linked to low-level inflammation. Choline, folic acid, and vitamin D deficiency during obstetric interventions.*
  - *Prenatal and perinatal complications: complications during pregnancy such as foetal hypoxia, maternal stress, the relationship between genes and the environment, especially when the mother is genetically predisposed.*
  - *Genetic factors: psychosis or mood disorders such as major depression or bipolar disorder in the family.*
- **Psychological factors**: *prolonged stress, collective anxiety, and social isolation, developmental deviance and abnormalities in social interaction, childhood trauma, maternal stress or acute stress following parental separation or death, physical abuse.*

- **Environmental factors**: *constant exposure to violence, neglect of a disorganized family, migration, urban life, negative life experience, cannabis use*, *poor nutrition.*
- **Educational factors**: *Repeated and long-term harassment can negatively influence the student's mental state, and over time, this continuous emotional pressure can lead to the development of psychotic disorders.*

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Solidarity in Education: From Child to Community, a Construction for the Future

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Abstract. *In today's rapidly changing world, with its diversity of cultures and focus on individual achievement, the need for education to change the focus in order to place a greater emphasis on the development of human values has been raised. One essential value which fosters an individual's harmonious growth and promotes social cohesion is solidarity. This paper will present arguments for supporting the instilling of solidarity in early childhood education by describing the ways in which the preschool setting can be utilized to successfully promote the development of prosocial behaviours. Based upon my experience as an educator and on information found in up-to-date reference materials, strategies that can be used for fostering the development of empathy, collaboration and a sense of social responsibility are described. Attention will also be paid to the role(s) of educators as models and facilitators of relationships between children and the importance of partnerships between the family, preschool and community. Through a real-world example of an activity with a group of children, it is evidenced that children can show solidarity without any help from adults; therefore, this is a value that will develop through experience and be experienced meaningfully. Education for solidarity provides a long-term investment in helping children grow into well-rounded, caring, active members of our society.*

Keywords: *solidarity, early education, empathy, cooperation, community, values, inclusion.*

1. Introduction

Our modern-day society is experiencing a steady state of change. These changes will directly affect the manner in which people relate with each other. The ease of access to information is making it easier for individuals to have relationships with each other; however, as a result of these changes interpersonal relationships appear to be increasingly fragile and superficial; in some cases, individuals may not even feel a connection to one another. In this changing world, education should not simply consist of delivering knowledge to students; its role has become broader and more significant by helping to develop students who understand each other, respect differences among each other, communicate appropriately and coexist together as a cohesive unit within a community. I believe that solidarity is among the most important values we can develop in our children from the time they are very young. Solidarity involves more than just giving material things; it means learning to be aware of others' needs, feeling for them and then behaving in ways that help them or make them feel better. Solidarity is an

ethics/moral and social value that creates trust and strengthens human relationships (Immordino-Yang, Immordino-Yang, Damasio & Gardner, 2019) and forms the basis of a society that is more caring and inclusive. During my time working with groups of children, I have observed that children do not demonstrate these types of behaviours naturally. Children do not just become supportive and exhibit cooperation naturally; these attitudes develop as a result of the combination of repeated exposure, positive role models, guidance, and encouragement from adults. Early schooling is done for the development of children's personalities. It is the stage at which children develop their first meaningful social relationships (Wentzel, 2025) and learn about the basic rules of living together. Therefore, kindergarten is a lot more than just a place to learn how to count, name letters or gain basic cognitive skills; it's also a place where they learn to share, wait, cooperate with others and express empathy. Through their interactions with each other, their play and through guided learning experiences, children will experience the value of respect, mutual support, and belonging to a group. When kids are young, they're really impressionable. From the time they are born until they reach twelve, everything that happens to them has a big influence on how they will act when they grow up. Through actions such as assisting a friend, comforting someone who feels down, or working together as a team where everyone does their part, children learn the value of community in a natural and authentic manner. The adult (teacher) has an integral part in reinforcing this learning because the adult not only organizes the learning environment but also demonstrates the behaviour, language and attitude that the student is expected to show. When a child experiences a warm and supportive learning environment it provides them with a sense of security which in turn teaches them to emulate that same sort of behaviour/attitude in their interactions with others. Solidarity should be cultivated at an early age for a more sustainable society overall. With changing societal needs because of social distancing and increased levels of individualism, education is one of the major keys to developing healthy communities and well-adjusted individuals through promoting power through solidarity in early childhood education settings (UNESCO 2020). In doing so, we assist children in adjusting to groups, but we also produce future adults with strong empathy and responsibility who are willing to establish positive relationships with others.

2. Solidarity, Concept and Educational Relevance

A solidifying disposition of an individual towards oneself to work for others through an empathic feeling of social responsibility is the definition of Solidarity. In the educational environment, solidarity is seen through the way students support each other with cooperative behaviours, providing mutual aid, actively listening to one another and respecting each other's differences. Solidarity is not only a moral standard; it is also a practical competence, which children can learn and use in daily life through daily

experiences with others. Studies have shown that developing socio-emotional (SE) skills is an important part of a child's success in school and social integration (CASEL, 2020; OECD, 2021). SE skills include: - Empathy - Self-control - Emotional awareness - Ability to communicate effectively (oral, written, nonverbal) - Conflict resolution Children with well-developed SE competencies find it easier to adapt to group settings, build positive relationships, and face challenges positively. Consequently, there is an increasing emphasis in contemporary education on balanced development of the cognitive and socio-emotional domains of learning. In the absence of empathy, there cannot be any solidarity. A child that understands how to identify the emotional state of others has a higher likelihood of responding to those feelings in a kind, supportive and socially appropriate manner. Empathy is the foundation from which to build prosocial attitudes. In the absence of empathy, any helping behaviour may be less about the helper's desire to help and more about fulfilling the expectations of another person. Therefore, we need to ensure that educational settings create opportunities for children to see, express and talk about their own and others' emotions in a safe, guided environment. One example is developing collaborative, interactive, and reflective learning settings. For instance, group projects, role play, storytelling, and cooperative games will assist children in exploring other perspectives and realising the value of working collaboratively. Educators should also model empathetic behaviours by demonstrating to children how to listen, respond, and support each other. So, developing empathy and solidarity should not just happen on their own. They should be an important part of the focus in early education. Cultivating these values consistently will help educators create individuals who are not just academically competent, but also socially aware, emotionally stable, and able to create meaningful relationships with others.

3. Early Education and the Development of Prosocial Behaviours

The preschool years are among the most vulnerable and influential periods that occur during a child's life. It's during the preschool years that children obtain the building blocks for who they become as adults and all that they can do for themselves or depend on others to do for them. The interactions they experience with others during their preschool years will affect how they see themselves and how they connect with and react to their surroundings throughout their lifetime. For this reason, early childhood education needs to be intentionally designed to promote not only the cognitive development (European Commission, 2019) of young children, but also the social and emotional development of the same children through intentional practice and interactions. The basis of learning and investigating the world around us as a child is through play. When engaging in play, children are allowed to explore various roles, express their feelings and ideas and communicate with those around them, all of which

help children develop social skills. Group games (cooperative games) allow children to develop cooperation, patience and respect for one another. Through cooperative play, children also learn how to follow rules, negotiate and take turns while being aware of the needs of others. As a result of these experiences, children develop a sense of belonging and solidarity with others in the group they are playing with. Childhood education encompasses many forms of storytelling and artistic expression. Children learn about different characters, situations and emotions that help them appreciate other people's perspectives through narrative. When children listen to and talk with others about stories they can identify with or relate to various feelings (happiness, sadness, fear or empathy) and connect the story to their own lives. Artistic activities also give children a chance to express themselves emotionally and creatively through visual or performance art (drawing, painting, music, drama). These activities help kids learn how to consider other people's perspectives, identify feelings, be sensitive and empathetic, and build relationships. As such, storytelling and the arts are significant ways to help create empathy that leads to solidarity, so it is critical to incorporate play, storytelling, and art into regular education so that children grow to be balanced, socially conscious, and emotionally intelligent individuals.

4. Teaching Strategies for Cultivating Solidarity

To promote solidarity among young children, educators use many techniques that stimulate its growth during daily activities. For instance, providing opportunities for children to come together as a team on different occasions can promote cooperation, sharing responsibility and learning that they are part of something larger than themselves. Promoting Emotional Expression Is Another Critical Strategy. Through this avenue of expression, children learn how to express their feelings, communicate, and develop empathy through listening to the feelings of others. Educators should facilitate this process by providing an atmosphere where children feel safe and free to express their emotion. Stories can also have powerful moral lessons for children. By providing children with examples of kindness, fairness, and helping others through carefully chosen stories, children can be emotionally connected to the texts and see the consequences of both positive and negative behaviour. Working with children on their understanding of the actions of the characters in the story can also give them the opportunity to examine the impact of those actions, either positively or negatively, from the perspective of the participants in the situation. Also, including children in aid activities, such as helping a peer, taking on some small classroom responsibilities or doing small, good deeds; gives children real life experiences of being there for each other. Thus, how these experiences create experience with the idea of solidarity; and therefore, help children go from knowing what solidarity is to experiencing it in their

daily lives. Collectively, all these strategies collaborate to create an educational environment that is encouraging, positive, and welcoming for children. As a result, children will be able to feel welcomed, respected, and secure - this will enable children to have meaningful interactions with one another and develop pro-social behaviours through a process of modelling empathy, affiliation, and co-operation.

5. Example from Practice

A significant event from my teaching experience happened while my students were eating their snack one day. One child who had forgotten their snack was isolated from the others and was showing signs of sadness. I decided not to step in immediately but rather to observe how the other children would react toward him. After some time, a young girl offered this student part of her snack and soon after, several other children did the same. Following this experience, we had a group discussion about how we felt and the events surrounding the experiences that took place. The children identified feelings associated with sadness, kindness, and joy. Consequently, they demonstrated understanding of the events which happened; they also expressed in their own words the importance of helping others and that their actions made the student feel better about themselves. This example illustrates how simple explanations will not give individuals solidarity, but rather it is developed through experiences that are direct, and meaningful to those individuals. Once children have the chance to act out freely and see the benefits from their good deeds, this is when values such as consideration for others, being generous and working with others are developed at an instinctive and permanent level.

6. Role of the Educator

The educator serves a dual purpose as both a model for the child as well as a guide during the developmental process. By modelling good behaviour, attitudes and relationships, the educator has a direct effect on how children form their own values and social skills and how they will relate to others. Children learn by what adults say, however, they also learn through observation which means when an educator demonstrates empathy, patience, respect and openness; that serves as a very good example for children to imitate in their own interactions with others. The teacher also functions as a guide through purposeful creation of environments that foster collaboration, communication, and mutuality. The teacher supports children by resolving conflict, promoting discussion, and affirming their emotions to teach them how to behave socially and develop emotional intelligence. Creating a safe and caring educational space is critical to building strong relationships with children. If children feel supported, respected, and accepted, they will be encouraged to freely share their thoughts, build trust, and develop collaborative skills. Reducing children’s anxiety and

creating a sense of belonging are both encouraging elements promoting emotional wellness and effective academic performance. The educator along with a conducive environment plays a pivotal role in fostering harmonious relationships and instilling values of empathy, respect, and support for one another.

7. Educational Partnership

The family collaborates with a student to create a culture based on their values (such as solidarity). Education occurs outside of the classroom. Education is an ongoing experience throughout a person's life, including family. For values to truly be integrated into a child's character, they should receive consistent support and reinforcement in both environments. If a child sees these values being exhibited by their peers and family members (for example, through empathy, kindness, and a willingness to assist others), it will increase the likelihood that he/she will replicate them. A healthy collaborative relationship between teachers & parents builds continuity in the student's learning. Good communication, guidance & mutual strategies enable teachers and parents to work together to establish a supportive & understanding framework for children. Parents should have opportunities to involve their child(ren) in basic household tasks, to engage in discussions about feelings & to demonstrate respectful and caring behaviour whenever possible. Simultaneously, the community offers a valuable contribution by giving children an authentic context to demonstrate their value system. By participating in community-related functions such as community service, social action or teamwork exercises, children experience camaraderie outside of school. Through these opportunities, children learn that assisting others occurs in many ways and locations; therefore, the act of helping others is a core part of being social. The relationship between all three different entities, i.e. the family, the school, and the community, will create an available and effective community for the development of socially responsible, caring, and active individuals.

8. Current Challenges

The impact of technology and the speed of modern-day living have adversely impacted the quality of social relationships in present society. Excessive use of electronic equipment limits face-to-face contact among children and reduces their ability to engage in authentic communication, share emotions, and develop effective interpersonal skill sets. Additionally, many families report feeling time-impoverished and, as a result, have fewer opportunities to interact meaningfully with one another. This is an important aspect of building empathy and developing social understanding. Educational institutions have a significant compensation role with respect to education. They should purposefully set up opportunities for face-to-face contact for children to

communicate, cooperate and build real-world relationships through group activities, discussions and cooperative work. Educators can foster children's active participation in their peer groups and develop social and emotional skills through collaboration, group discussions and cooperative activities. In addition, through education, children will learn to use technology in moderation, while at the same time, emphasizing the need for personal relationships with others (Elias, 2019). Education creates a nurturing environment that helps combat the negative influences of modern day living and produces social competence, compassion and adaptability in young people.

9. Conclusions

The idea of solidarity is a core element required for society to function in a healthy and balanced manner. Solidarity also enhances social relationships between people and fosters interdependence; thus, it creates an environment characterized by trust, respect, and a cooperative spirit among people toward one another. The increasing pace of transformational changes happening and increasing individualism are making solidarity an increasingly necessary element for maintaining community and for supporting the well-being of people. The development of this value is heavily influenced by how we initiate our children's education. Preschool provides a great opportunity to establish healthy attitudes, behaviours, and relationships with others in a way that is natural and lasting. Children also learn about the relevance of helping others in addition to how to assist them by receiving carefully planned experiences, good role models, and positive experiences. The continual encouragement of cooperation among children, as they grow into adults, helps to create people who show empathy towards others and can contribute positively to their family and community. Children who have learned the concept of being cooperative and able to empathize with others will develop into responsible adults who can create and maintain healthy relationships, and who will work to create a community that is more supportive and accepting of individuals from all walks of life.

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ISBN 978-606-37-3037-5