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Digital Capital and the Transition to Digitalization in Romanian Social Work: A Theoretical and Applied Perspective
Book Review: Alina Bărbuță, The Digital Capital Index in the Context of the Transition to Digitalization of the Social Work System, Lumen Publishing House, Iasi, 2025 [Indexul capitalului digital în contextul tranzitiei către digitalizarea sistemului de asistentă socială, Editura Lumen, Iasi, 2025]

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Abstract: *This review examines Alina Bărbuță's work on digital capital in Romanian social work, which offers a significant contribution to digital sociology and social work practice. The book proposes digital capital as a distinct form of capital, extending Bourdieu's theoretical framework to the digital context. Through three complementary empirical studies employing methodological triangulation, the author analyzes the integration of digital competencies in social work education, students' digital literacy levels, and labor market expectations. The work highlights Romania's position among Europe's lowest-ranked countries in digital competencies according to DESI, emphasizing persistent digital divides across urban-rural, gender, age, and socioeconomic dimensions. The author develops a digital profile for entry-level social workers and provides evidence-based recommendations for curricular reform and public policy development, demonstrating how digital capital mediates the relationship between online experiences and offline outcomes in social work practice.*

Keywords: *digital capital; social work education; digital inequalities; evidence-based policy.*

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Alina Bărbuță's work represents a significant contribution to the field of digital sociology and social work, addressing issues of particular relevance in the contemporary context of the digital transformation of Romanian society. The volume is distinguished by the theoretical rigor of its approach, its profoundly interdisciplinary character, and its constant concern for the transferability of research results into practice and public policies in the field of social work.

Theoretical foundation and scientific innovation

One of the main strengths of the work lies in the solidity of its conceptual apparatus and in the author's capacity to integrate, within a coherent framework, theories from digital sociology, together with Bourdieu's theories concerning social and cultural capital, as well as contemporary paradigms regarding digital inequalities. The author demonstrates a profound understanding of Bourdieu's theories, which she extends and applies in an original manner to the digital context, conceptualizing—based on these theories—digital capital as a distinct and independent form of capital, capable of interacting with other forms of capital recognized by Bourdieu (1986).

The scientific innovation of the approach manifests itself primarily through the proposal of the concept of digital capital as a resource that is accumulable and transferable, situated at the intersection between digital competencies and access to technology. Unlike previous attempts to integrate the digital dimension into cultural or social capital, the author convincingly argues that digital capital qualifies as a new form of capital, requiring effort and time investment for accumulation, similar to other forms of capital proposed by Bourdieu. This conceptualization surpasses previous approaches, such as those of Merisalo (2016) or Ragnedda (2017), which she nevertheless valorizes through the integration of the practical dimension and through the operationalization of the concept of digital capital in the specific context of social work.

Another element of innovation consists in the introduction of the concept of the "process of fixation and selection," defined as the ensemble of activities conducted in the digital arena in an intentional manner and oriented toward achieving goals intended to improve various areas of an individual's life. This concept brings an original contribution to understanding how digital capital mediates the relationship between online experiences and concrete benefits in offline life.

The author succeeds in demonstrating that understanding digital phenomena cannot be complete without taking into consideration this multidimensional framework for conceptualizing digital capital, which thus

becomes a key concept for explaining the structure and functioning of digitalized society.

The impact of digitalization on social work

One of the most valuable aspects of the work is the profound and nuanced analysis of the impact of digitalization on education and practice in social work. The author does not limit herself to a simple enumeration of the benefits or challenges of digitalization but proposes a systemic approach that examines how digital technologies reconfigure educational paradigms, relationships between social workers and beneficiaries, as well as the ethical standards of the profession.

The work, originally a doctoral thesis, highlights the necessity of a paradigmatic shift in social work pedagogy, in which the emphasis moves from teaching theoretical knowledge to developing digital competencies essential for modern professional practice. The author explores in depth innovative methods of education mediated by digital technologies, such as simulation-based learning, virtual reality, experiential learning, and gamification, demonstrating their potential to improve students' preparation for real practice situations.

The ethical dimension of the digitalization of social services is treated with particular attention, with the author identifying the fundamental dilemmas facing professionals: protecting confidentiality and privacy, maintaining professional boundaries in the digital environment, and ensuring effective and secure communication with clients. This critical analysis demonstrates that digitalization is not a neutral process but one that requires constant ethical reflection and the development of new professional standards.

Furthermore, the work brings to the forefront the issue of digital inclusion and digital inequalities in the context of social work, emphasizing the risk that the digitalization process may accentuate existing gaps between different population categories. The work demonstrates that social workers must adopt a participatory approach in the development and implementation of technologies, collaborating with professionals from various fields to ensure that technological solutions respond to clients' real needs and do not perpetuate or amplify existing social inequalities.

Research methodology and scientific rigor

The methodological architecture of the work deserves special appreciation. The mixed approach, which combines qualitative and quantitative methods through three complementary empirical studies, demonstrates the rigor and complexity of the research endeavor. The first

study, based on content analysis of educational norms, examines the degree of integration of digital competencies in bachelor's degree programs in social work, utilizing the European DigComp 2.2 framework as an analytical instrument. The second study explores the level of students' digital competencies and their perception of the utility of digital technologies in practice. The third study, through semi-structured interviews with department directors and employers in the field of social services, offers a perspective on labor market expectations and on how digital competencies are valued in professional practice.

Methodological triangulation not only increases the validity of results but also offers a comprehensive picture of the investigated issues, from the level of formal curriculum to students' perceptions and employers' expectations. The results of the three studies converge toward identifying significant gaps in the digital preparation of future social workers, as well as toward outlining clear directions for action to improve the situation.

Relevance for evidence-based public policies

The practical value of the work for designing evidence-based public policies in social work is indisputable. The author does not content herself with theoretical analysis or simple observation of problems but offers concrete and empirically grounded recommendations for improving the educational system in the field of social work and for the effective integration of digital technologies in social practice.

The development of a digital profile for the entry-level social worker represents a result of major importance for practitioners, educators, and public policy decision-makers. This profile defines the competencies necessary to navigate effectively in the digital environment, including continuous learning, manifesting professional behavior in the online environment, evaluating digital risks and opportunities, applying professional ethics, and integrating digital tools into social practice. Such instruments offer a clear framework for evaluating competencies and for designing training programs, facilitating the alignment of the educational system with the practical requirements of the profession.

Additionally, educational policies are proposed regarding the inclusion of digital technologies in the social work specialization curriculum, which represents a direct contribution to the curricular reform process. The recommendations are grounded in the results of the three empirical studies and reflect both the needs identified among students and employers' expectations and faculty members' vision. This volume can serve as a basis for concrete reform initiatives at the national or institutional level.

The work demonstrates, through the empirical results presented, that Romania ranks among the last places in Europe regarding digital competencies and internet use, according to the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI). The evident digital divide between the urban and rural populations, differences related to gender, age, and socio-economic status—all of these are rigorously documented and analyzed in their broader social context. These data offer a solid foundation for grounding public policies aimed at reducing digital inequalities and promoting digital inclusion.

Critical considerations and future directions

Although the work represents a major contribution to the field, it is important to mention several aspects that could be developed in subsequent research. The author honestly acknowledges the limitations of the research, including the fact that the sample of empirical studies focused on students and institutions from certain regions of Romania, which could limit the generalizability of results. Furthermore, the rapid dynamics of digital technologies means that any research in this field requires periodic updates to reflect new realities.

Another aspect that would merit additional attention in future research would be the analysis of the long-term impact of the integration of digital technologies—particularly Artificial Intelligence—on the practical outcomes of social work interventions. Although the work offers a clear picture of the necessary competencies and perceptions of different categories of actors involved, longitudinal studies could reveal how these competencies effectively translate into improved services offered to beneficiaries.

Conclusions

In conclusion, Dr. Alina Bărbuță's work represents a remarkable contribution to understanding and conceptualizing digital capital in the context of social work, offering a solid theoretical framework, valuable empirical results, and practical recommendations for improving the educational system and public policies in the field. The methodological rigor, depth of theoretical analysis, and constant concern for the applicability of results make this work an essential reference for researchers, educators, and practitioners in the field of social work.

The innovative character of the conceptualization of digital capital as a distinct form of capital, the harmonious integration of multiple theoretical paradigms, and the systemic approach to the issue of digitalization in social

work demonstrate the author's scientific maturity and her significant contribution to the development of the field. The research results offer a solid foundation for designing evidence-based educational and social policies, thus contributing not only to the advancement of theoretical knowledge but also to the practical improvement of the social work system in Romania.

The volume deserves to be read and studied not only by specialists in the field of social work but also by all those interested in the issues of digital inequalities, digital sociology, and the transformations that digitalization imposes on various professional fields. Through the clarity of exposition, rigor of analysis, and practical relevance of results, the work constitutes a model of engaged scientific research that places knowledge in the service of positive social transformation.

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