

Artificial Intelligence in Social Work Practice Embedded Development, Ethical Risks and the Path Forward

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Abstract

The deep embedding of artificial intelligence into social work has transitioned from theoretical discourse to practical reality, presenting a complex landscape of opportunities and risks. This paper unpacks the multi-layered embedding of artificial intelligence (AI) from four analytical dimensions: technological, epistemic, decisional, and relational. It identifies three interrelated risks: the erosion of professional autonomy accompanied by an accountability vacuum, the systematic entrenchment of algorithmic bias and social exclusion, and relational alienation leading to the dissolution of ethical safeguards. In response, the article proposes a framework emphasizing the redefinition of professional boundaries in human-machine collaboration, the embedding of ethical oversight and democratic governance mechanisms, and the promotion of interdisciplinary collaboration and participatory design. The article concludes that the future of social work in the digital age depends not on the boundaries of AI's capabilities, but on the consciousness, courage, and judgment of the social work profession itself. This ensures that the core values of human dignity, self-determination, and social justice remain at the forefront of practice.

Keywords

Technological embedding, Artificial intelligence, Social work, Embedded development, Relational embedding

Introduction

AI governance has become a central issue on the global agenda. In March 2024, the United Nations General Assembly adopted its first resolution on promoting safe and trustworthy AI systems, with support from over 120 member states including China and the United States. The resolution called on the international community to actively address issues of racial discrimination, bias, and human rights risks in AI development. In July of the same year, another resolution, proposed by China and focused on strengthening international cooperation on AI capacity building, received support from over 140 countries. It emphasized that AI development should adhere to a people-centered approach and promote the well-being of all humanity. It also acknowledged that without proper safeguards, AI carries potential risks of eroding human rights, reinforcing biases, and endangering personal data protection. Concurrently, the World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report 2024 identified AI-generated misinformation and disinformation as the foremost risk to global stability

over the next two years. From global policy platforms to academic discourse, the dual nature of AI is increasingly evident: It is both a source of opportunity and a wellspring of risk. The heightened policy attention is rooted in an increasingly clear reality: AI technologies are embedding themselves into various domains of social life at an unprecedented speed and depth. Technologies such as machine learning and natural language processing have moved from laboratories to frontline social service settings. They are playing increasingly significant roles in documentation automation and case management. They also contribute to service resource matching, intervention classification, and service monitoring [1]. The penetration of AI into the field of social work is no longer a question of "whether" but of "how" and "at what cost".

In fact, the application of AI in social work practice is accelerating across multiple dimensions. AI has expanded into risk assessment, decision support, education, and supervision, among other areas.

Surveyed social workers generally acknowledge AI's potential to improve service efficiency, but they also emphasize the urgent need for professional training in machine learning and natural language processing [2].

In the welfare sector, algorithm-assisted decision-making tools have been systematically applied to critical areas such as risk assessment, decision support, and service monitoring. The aim is to reduce uncertainty and bias in human judgment through data-driven approaches [3]. At the same time, generative and conversational AI systems - such as ChatGPT, voice assistants, and therapeutic chatbots - have shown considerable theoretical promise. Their promise is reflected in enhancing group communication and strengthening data analysis. They also show potential for supporting personalized interventions. However, empirical evidence of their effectiveness in real-world face-to-face group settings remains extremely limited [4]. AI-assisted risk assessment tools have been used across multiple domains to identify potential risks, and their capacity to rapidly analyze large datasets offers new possibilities for early intervention.

Yet technological embedding is never entirely value-neutral. Garkisch and Goldkind argue that AI systems trained on biased datasets may perpetuate and even reinforce harmful stereotypes and social inequalities [5]. From a critical perspective, algorithmic bias is not a technical glitch but a reproduction of structural inequalities at the level of code. Social work, which is committed to combating oppression, may inadvertently become a tool for entrenching oppression through inappropriate technological applications. Digitalization and AI present a dual challenge for social workers and vulnerable populations. On the one hand, technology holds the promise of expanding the accessibility and precision of services. On the other hand, without human rights-based strategic planning, AI may exacerbate rather than alleviate existing social exclusion. The erosion of data privacy, the diminishment of professional autonomy, the ambiguity of accountability mechanisms, and the further marginalization of the most vulnerable groups through the digital divide are all ethical tensions. These tensions cannot be overlooked in the deep embedding of AI into social work practice [6].

The embedded development of AI and social work

Understanding the relationship between AI and social work hinges on the concept of embedded development. This refers to the process by which AI is no longer an external technological tool but is progressively integrated into the knowledge base, workflows, and value judgments of social work. This embedding occurs not only at the technical level but also across epistemic, decisional, and relational dimensions. The core premise of embedded development is that the relationship between AI and social work has shifted from the application of external tools to the fusion of internal systems. As Boetto observes, the impact of AI on social work will depend more on factors beyond technical capability, including professional reflexivity, ethical frameworks, and organizational culture [7]. Lee propose the "ETHICS" framework, comprising Equity, Transparency, Human-centeredness, Integrity, Collaboration, and Safety, to systematically regulate the ethical use of AI in social work research. The very articulation of this framework acknowledges that AI's integration requires active normative steering, rather than being an automatic process of technological diffusion [8].

Technological embedding: From external tools to internal workflows

AI capabilities are transitioning from external assistive tools to integral components of internal workflows in social work. In this transition, AI tools are no longer merely technological add-ons that social workers use occasionally, but are increasingly embedded into the standard operating procedures of everyday practice. From intelligent alerts in case management systems to automated screenings in risk assessment tools, AI is entering social workers' interfaces as a default setting. This shift is driven primarily by AI's demonstrated utility in administrative and decision-making processes. AI's capacity for data processing, pattern recognition, and documentation can effectively free up social workers' human resources, alleviating heavy administrative burdens and allowing more time for direct service delivery. At the same time, AI's real-time responsiveness and large-scale analytical capabilities offer new possibilities for decision-making that traditionally relies on human expertise. In the field of

child welfare, a large-scale randomized controlled trial found that human workers exhibit complex cognitive and emotional responses when faced with algorithmically generated risk information. They neither fully trust algorithms nor can they completely disregard their suggestions, and this ambivalence constitutes a key barrier to technological embedding in decision-making [9].

Wilkins and Benett conducted a comparative experiment pitting ChatGPT against 581 qualified child and family social workers in terms of judgment accuracy [10]. Set against the backdrop of risk decision-making under incomplete information, this is a typical scenario in child welfare. In such scenarios, social workers must make predictive judgments about future parenting behaviors without clear causal links. The study found that ChatGPT outperformed the average judgment level of social workers in 11 out of 12 cases. The researchers note that this finding both highlights the potential of AI to support decision-making and reveals its fundamental limitations. AI is inherently ill-suited to understanding complex human needs and social contexts. The core of child welfare decision-making extends beyond risk prediction to encompass holistic judgments about family relationships, child developmental trajectories, and multiple social factors. These are precisely the dimensions that algorithms struggle to truly comprehend. Thus, integrating AI into social work practice requires leveraging its strengths in data processing and pattern recognition. This can improve decision efficiency while prudently safeguarding the irreducibly humanistic elements of the profession. These findings indicate that AI is no longer an option for social work but an unfolding reality. Technological embedding has advanced from the application of external tools to the organic integration of internal processes.

Epistemic embedding: Algorithmic knowledge alongside practice wisdom

AI's embedding is not merely technical but also epistemic. By analyzing vast datasets, AI systems identify patterns and trends that are imperceptible to human observation, generating outputs with a "quasi-authoritative" character. In risk assessment, predictive models are used to determine who is at risk

and which families should receive preventive support. In resource allocation, algorithms shape how scarce resources are distributed and which narratives about needs and responsibilities become visible in agency data. However, this epistemic embedding is not a one-way process of substitution. Through a pilot project with Finnish child welfare workers, Lehtiniemi found that the value of AI is often anticipated to lie in its capacity to produce anticipatory knowledge [11]. Yet in practice, social workers hold contextual expectations of AI, viewing anticipation as a practice of professional knowledge creation grounded in intimate engagement with service users. This suggests that AI's role in social work should be to support, rather than to produce knowledge outputs as an end in themselves.

At a broader level, AI's intervention in knowledge production challenges the epistemological foundations of social work. Traditionally, professional knowledge in social work is constructed on the basis of clinical experience, contextual understanding, and relational interactions with service users. Practice wisdom is regarded as a distinct mode of knowing, irreducible to algorithmic logic. AI's mode of knowledge output, based on pattern recognition and statistical correlation, fundamentally challenges this epistemological tradition. This correlation-based knowledge production enters high-stakes decision-making domains. It privileges a particular, technologized form of knowledge. This occurs at the expense of the professional judgments that social workers form through relational engagement in concrete situations. A deeper problem is that the apparent objectivity of AI outputs often masks the biases embedded in training datasets, the value-laden assumptions of algorithmic designers, and the inherent limitations of technical logic itself. This renders AI seemingly neutral, while in fact it is laden with unexamined value judgments. Garrett contends that the growing use of AI poses profound challenges to core ethical principles of social work. These principles include confidentiality and privacy, self-determination and participation rights, and treating people as "whole persons" [12]. He also calls into question the assumption that the AI industry's touted person-in-context possesses ethical capabilities beyond those of AI itself. AI's intervention in knowledge production is not merely a technical issue but a

fundamental epistemological question concerning whose knowledge is legitimate and which modes of knowing should guide practice. This compels social workers to reassess the relationships among professional knowledge, ethical judgment, and technological tools.

Decision-making embedding: From advisory support to weighted influence

Decision-making embedding is arguably the most contentious and consequential dimension of AI integration. Predictive analytics are increasingly deployed in high-stakes scenarios such as resource allocation and intervention selection. In social service settings, algorithmically assisted decision-support tools are reshaping how social workers make critical judgments. Yet this embedding is not a straightforward process of technological transplantation but a tension-laden sociotechnical transition. Perron systematically examines the responsible integration of AI in human service organizations [13]. They find that ethical concerns about AI deployment are not monolithic. These concerns include the displacement of professional judgment, model bias, and data labor exploitation. Instead, they vary significantly across implementation contexts and specific use cases. Their study challenges the binary thinking of either full acceptance or wholesale rejection of AI adoption. It demonstrates that different application scenarios present differentiated risk profiles, most of which can be effectively managed through prudent implementation strategies. The ethical concern that AI might replace professional judgment represents the most fundamental challenge in AI adoption in social work.

Ethical concerns about AI applications vary according to several factors. These include data sensitivity, potential impacts on client well-being, professional oversight requirements, and the types of AI tools used. This necessitates a multidimensional risk assessment approach. They recommend that human service organizations start with low-risk application scenarios, accumulating empirical evidence through careful experimentation. Decision-making embedding is not an “all-or-nothing” process but an ongoing dynamic of continuously delineating and recalibrating boundaries between professional judgment and technical assistance. The real risk of decision-making embedding lies not in

whether AI will replace human judgment, but in how professional boundaries can be maintained amid technological permeation. This requires social workers to maintain critical scrutiny of algorithmic outputs and organizational-level ethical oversight and risk assessment mechanisms.

Relational embedding: The technological restructuring of human service chains

The most profound dimension of AI embedding lies in its reshaping of relationships. The core of social work is built on interpersonal connections between social workers and service users, including empathy, trust, acceptance, and companionship, capacities that cannot be replicated by algorithms. When AI systems enter this relational space, they may appear as online counseling chatbots, algorithmic decision-support tools, or predictive models for assessment and classification. In these roles, they reconfigure the interactional structures and dynamics between social workers and service users in specific ways. AI is not introduced into a technical vacuum but is embedded within institutional frameworks that have long histories of punitive and exclusionary practices. This means that AI’s reshaping of relationships is never a neutral technical intervention but occurs within specific institutional contexts, power relations, and historical legacies.

Segal, in a phenomenological analysis of 70 social work master’s students, examined how social workers assess ChatGPT’s application in resolving ethical dilemmas involving confidentiality [14]. The study found that participants rated their own responses as more comprehensive, more legally grounded, and more empathetic than ChatGPT’s solutions. ChatGPT’s responses were perceived as superficial and lacking emotional understanding. The study emphasizes that although ChatGPT holds potential as an assistive tool, it cannot substitute for social workers’ ethical judgment and empathy. This finding reveals a fundamental limitation of AI in relational embedding: Algorithms can simulate information processing and pattern recognition but cannot genuinely attune to service users’ emotional contexts and lived situations. Social work’s relational practice is built on embodied presence, emotional resonance, and contextual understanding, dimensions that remain beyond the reach of algorithms.

Risks and ethical dilemmas in AI-integrated social work

Crises of professional autonomy and the accountability vacuum

The professional authority of social work is built upon a distinctive mode of knowing, namely practice wisdom. This is a form of knowledge that cannot be fully encoded into algorithmic rules. It depends on social workers' intuitive grasp of complex factors in specific situations. It also depends on their holistic understanding of service users' circumstances. And it depends on their capacity to make prudent judgments under conditions of incomplete information. The operational logic of AI systems stands in stark contrast to this. Algorithms rely on pattern recognition and statistical inference from historical data, and their judgments essentially reduce complex human situations to computable feature variables. When this correlation-driven reasoning logic is introduced into high-stakes decision-making scenarios in social work, it brings not merely auxiliary technical support, but also a situation where algorithmic knowledge gradually overrides practitioners' context-based professional judgments.

AI systems were initially positioned as decision-support tools, with their outputs described as auxiliary information for social workers' reference. However, AI is becoming increasingly pervasive in risk assessment, resource allocation, intervention planning, and other areas. As a result, algorithmic recommendations have gradually acquired substantive decision-making weight in organizational practice. Social workers face a structural dilemma: They can neither fully comprehend the internal logic of algorithms nor avoid bearing responsibility for the consequences of adopting or rejecting AI suggestions. This asymmetrical structure of accountability makes rejecting AI recommendations a high-risk act, thereby unconsciously driving the transfer of professional judgment to algorithmic judgment.

Accompanying the erosion of professional judgment is the blurring of accountability mechanisms. When AI-assisted decision-making leads to errors, assigning responsibility becomes an intractable problem. Algorithm developers are responsible for technical design, but the performance of AI systems in real-world applications often exceeds the preset scope of their

training environments. Agencies that procure these tools are accountable for their selection, but most social service organizations lack the professional capacity to assess the ethical risks of AI systems. Social workers who follow AI recommendations are in the most vulnerable position. They have neither participated in algorithm design nor can they fully understand its internal operations. Yet they must bear direct responsibility for the consequences of AI-assisted decisions in practice. Current ethical codes and legal frameworks lack clear provisions for allocating responsibility in algorithm-assisted decision-making. This series of dilemmas reveals a sobering reality: The erosion of professional autonomy is not a distant theoretical risk, but an immediate experience that has already provoked deep concern among practitioners. Filling this accountability vacuum requires not more technical guidelines, but a fundamental reexamination of the professional boundaries and responsibility frameworks of social work in the age of AI.

Algorithmic bias and the systematic entrenchment of social exclusion

Algorithmic bias is one of the most destructive risks in integrating AI into social work practice. AI training data contain historical discriminations along dimensions such as race, class, and gender. When these data are used to train algorithms, the biases are automated and scaled. In other words, algorithms are not value-neutral technical tools, but mappings and replications of social inequalities at the level of code. In the welfare sector, algorithm-assisted decision-making tools have been systematically applied to risk assessment, but how algorithmic bias affects human workers' judgments at the street level remains an underexplored question. When predictive algorithms are used to determine who is at risk and which families should receive preventive support, algorithmic bias may lead to over-surveillance of or service deprivation for specific groups. Even when algorithm designers subjectively pursue fairness, the structural inequalities inherent in training data are still encoded into algorithmic logic in the form of statistical correlations. Thus, ostensibly objective algorithmic outputs actually bear the imprint of historical discrimination.

Ahn provides evidence supporting this judgment through their study of a machine learning model for

home-visiting services [15].

The model's estimated improvement effects for Asian mothers and foreign-born Hispanic mothers were significantly lower than for other groups. This indicates that algorithmic fairness issues manifest with notable differentiation across subgroups. At the same time, the rapid advancement of AI is deepening the digital divide. AI services require devices, internet access, and digital literacy. Yet the populations most in need, including low-income families, the elderly, people with disabilities, and residents of remote areas, often lack these conditions. Technological optimization may serve the easily reachable rather than the most needy. When social service agencies begin integrating AI tools into service delivery processes, those who cannot effectively use these technologies may be excluded from services or receive only lower-quality alternatives. This exclusion is often implicit; it does not appear as overt rejection but manifests in seemingly neutral forms such as technological incompatibility or system mismatch.

When algorithmic bias and digital exclusion combine, a twofold deprivation mechanism is formed. AI systems place specific groups under disproportionate surveillance through biased predictions, while the digital divide excludes other groups from the service resources that technology can offer. If social workers lack systematic awareness of these two mechanisms, their professional practice may inadvertently drift away from the profession's justice mission.

Relational alienation and the dissolution of ethical safeguards

The most profound dimension of AI embedding lies in its reshaping of relationships and its erosion of core ethical principles. Empathy, trust, and acceptance, the core capabilities of social work, cannot be replicated by algorithms. AI-mediated service relationships may render interactions instrumentalized, standardized, and flattened. AI systems are deployed for initial screening, needs assessment, or even counseling conversations. The interaction between social workers and service users is based on embodied presence, emotional resonance, and contextual understanding. However, this interaction may be reduced to a technical process of information input and output. Empathy, as a core competence of social work, faces the risk of being diluted and formatted in AI-mediated interactions. This

risk of dehumanization erodes the quality of service relationships at the micro level. At the meso level, organizational pursuit of efficiency may drive rapid AI deployment. This deployment may overlook technology's potential harm to relational practice. At the macro level, the proliferation of AI may reshape societal understandings of "what constitutes effective social services". It may place quantifiable and standardizable technical outputs above non-quantifiable interpersonal connections.

A survey found that educators' attitudes toward generative AI exhibit a complex duality. They recognize the potential of AI in simulating cases, providing personalized feedback, and generating teaching resources. They also widely worry that AI use may weaken students' opportunities to develop critical thinking and relationship-building skills [16,17]. Social work services involve the most sensitive personal information, including domestic violence, mental health, immigration status, and child maltreatment. The large-scale data collection, storage, and secondary use by AI systems make the traditional confidentiality framework difficult to operate effectively. Informed consent is a crucial ethical safeguard in AI-assisted practice. However, when service access is conditional on data concession, informed consent often becomes a mere formality. Service users, when signing consent forms, usually cannot truly understand how their data will be collected, stored, analyzed, and for what purposes they may be used. The black-box nature of AI systems, namely the opacity of algorithmic decision-making processes, further complicates this issue. Social workers need to develop a technological consciousness that can simultaneously address data ethics and the ethical contexts of social work practice. This consciousness should enable them to clearly explain to service users, in specific situations, the role AI plays in their services and the potential risks involved.

In integrating AI into social work education and practice, it is essential to maintain attention to the core values of relational learning and ethical reflection. The ultimate test of relational embedding is not technical efficiency, but whether service users are still treated as whole persons in the process of being served.

Towards a digital and intelligent future for social work

Redefining professional boundaries in human-machine collaboration

The introduction of AI does not negate the professionalism of social work; rather, it redefines its boundaries. The enhancement of technical capabilities does not signal the withdrawal of professional judgment - rather, it demands sustained scrutiny of its consequences. On the contrary, the AI era places higher demands on social workers' critical thinking abilities. Social workers need to clearly distinguish what should be undertaken by AI and what must be safeguarded by humans. AI has significant advantages in data processing, pattern recognition, documentation, and standardized information retrieval. These tasks can be delegated to technological systems, thereby freeing up social workers' human resources for more complex endeavors. However, core professional competencies such as relationship building, value judgment, ethical deliberation, and contextual understanding must always remain under the control of human practitioners.

The establishment of these boundaries requires a systematic response at the educational level. Social work education should integrate AI literacy into its comprehensive core curriculum. This enables students to master the basic operations of AI tools. More importantly, it enables them to develop a critical understanding of technological limitations and ethical risks. Social workers need to grasp the core logic of algorithmic decision-making, identify dataset biases, and prudently evaluate the reliability of AI outputs within specific service contexts. At the same time, in-service social workers also need to acquire these competencies through continuing education. Only by establishing a systematic understanding of AI at the educational level can social workers maintain professional autonomy when facing technological systems, rather than passively accepting algorithmic outputs. The cultivation of such competencies is not merely a matter of technical skill transmission. It is a reaffirmation of professional identity. It positions social workers in the AI era not as subjects to be replaced by technology, but as guides and evaluators of technological application.

Embedding ethical oversight and democratic governance mechanisms

The ethical risks of AI cannot be mitigated solely by relying on the self-discipline of technology developers or the individual judgments of social workers. Systematic oversight and governance mechanisms must be established at the organizational and professional levels. At the institutional level, the introduction of any AI tool should be subject to an ethical review process. This review should not be a one-time access assessment but should encompass bias detection, privacy impact evaluation, service user feedback collection, and regular effectiveness reviews. The core function of ethical review is not to impede technology adoption. It is to delineate non-negotiable bottom lines in technological applications. This ensures that AI deployment always serves the well-being of service users rather than the efficiency metrics of agencies.

At the professional level, social work organizations should take the lead in developing comprehensive ethical guidelines and usage standards for AI. These guidelines need to be specific to different application scenarios and agency contexts, clarifying social workers' rights, responsibilities, and behavioral boundaries when using AI-assisted tools. For instance, when AI systems are used for risk assessment, social workers should retain the final interpretive authority and decision-making power over algorithmic outputs, ensuring meaningful human oversight. When AI is employed as a self-help tool for service users, agencies should ensure that service users have full informed consent and the right to refuse. At the policy level, social workers should bring the value commitments of social justice into public discussions on AI governance, actively advocating for technology policies that tilt toward vulnerable groups. AI governance should not be the exclusive domain of technical elites. The participation of social work will inject a unique practice-based perspective into ethical discussions on AI, ensuring that technological development does not come at the expense of the most vulnerable populations.

Promoting interdisciplinary collaboration and participatory design

The design and development of AI tools have long been dominated by technical experts, with social workers

often only participating in testing and feedback as end users after products have been finalized. This model makes it difficult for the design logic of AI tools to fully reflect the professional needs and practice wisdom of social work. Interdisciplinary collaboration requires social workers to participate in the early stages of technology development, working alongside technical experts, legal scholars, and ethicists to define problems, design functionalities, and assess risks. What social workers contribute to this collaboration is not technical knowledge but their professional understanding of service users' needs, relational practice, and ethical complexities. These understandings are crucial for designing AI systems that truly serve human well-being. At the same time, participatory design principles require that service users and their communities be included in the co-creation process of AI tools. Service users are not merely technology users but should also be subjects of technology design. Their understanding of their own needs, their experiences of the service process, and their perceptions of technology's potential impacts are all irreplaceable sources of knowledge in the AI design process. Future AI systems must be co-developed with affected communities, rather than developed for them. From tool selection and modes of use to informed consent and outcome evaluation, every stage should maintain conscious vigilance over relational values. The combination of interdisciplinary collaboration and participatory design will transform AI from a technology imposed on service users into a tool co-created with service users. This transformation will thereby establish a genuine dialogue between technological logic and professional values.

Conclusion

Technology is evolving, but the fundamental concerns of social work remain unchanged and will not change. Human dignity, self-determination, and social justice are the core values that constitute the professional identity of social work. These values should not be weakened in the AI era. Rather, they need to be safeguarded with even greater consciousness. AI is neither the savior of social work nor its gravedigger. It is merely a tool, a powerful one that must be used prudently. Its ultimate value depends on those who use it. It depends on whether social workers can maintain

clear professional judgment amid technological tides. It depends on whether they can uphold the centrality of relationships in the face of efficiency temptations. It also depends on whether they can always treat service users as whole persons beneath the myth of algorithmic objectivity. The future belongs to practitioners and researchers who can both master technology and safeguard the humanistic core. The prospect of social work in the digital and intelligent age does not depend on the boundaries of AI's capabilities, but on the consciousness, courage, and judgment of the social work profession itself.

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Conflicts of Interest

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