

# Understanding the Nuances of Relationships in Social Work

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## ABSTRACT

*Professional relationship in social work is central to understanding and addressing individual challenges within human relationships. These relationships are dynamic, purposeful and emotionally engaging, rooted in empathy, respect and mutual growth. Historically, evolving from terms like “friendship” and “rapport,” the professional relationship emphasises a structured, time-bound alliance focused on client needs. Influenced by personal, cultural and psychological factors, it facilitates emotional healing, capacity building and effective adjustment. This research paper has been trying to conceptualise professional relationships in social work. In addition to this, an attempt has been made to highlight trust as one of the most important elements of this professional relationship. An effort has also been made to highlight the impact of artificial intelligence and digitalisation on professional relationships in contemporary times. Lastly, the paper highlights the boundaries of professional relationships to safeguard the profession and client from any professional problems. For the purpose of this paper, secondary sources of data have been analysed. The research paper highlights that successful engagement depends on the social worker’s qualities—self-awareness, honesty, communication—and the client’s readiness. Professional boundaries help prevent exploitation, conflict and harm, particularly in relationships marked by power imbalances.*

**Keywords:** Confidentiality, Empathy Rapport, Trust, Profession

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**How to Cite:** Parihar, A., Devi, N., & Gaur, G. (2025). Understanding the nuances of relationships in social work. *Social Work Chronicle*, 14(1), 59-74.

## INTRODUCTION

Individuals and society are interdependent and, it is impossible for the individual and the society to survive without each other. Society assumes the form of society because of the relationships of human beings. The relationships among individuals are the result of collective/shared and emotionally charged circumstances (Perlman, 1957: 64). It is a kind of bond filled with emotions that acts as a transmitting belt between two or more individuals (Upadhyay, 2003). Relationship is “a discernible process by which people are connected and around which the group takes its shape and form” (Coyle, 1948). These relationships of human beings in groups affect the thinking, feelings and actions of people. These relations are not unbiased and free-buoyant; somewhat, they are to a better or secondary extent even unhappy, influenced and established by wider cultural, socioeconomic and political dimensions. This relationship covers an enormous area of inter-human contacts. The existence of a human being is because of his relationship with human beings around him (Hennessey, 2011). The moment when emotions move from one person to another, the relationship gets established between them (Perlman, 1957). Moreover, Biestek (1957) has considered it as “the dynamic interactions of attitudes and emotions.” Therefore, it can be said that the relationship is a phenomenon occurring between human beings when they interact with individuals or groups. Furthermore, it is not possible to lead life without relationships. All our social institutions are built around this relationship. The relationship of the individual with others has a huge impact on his growth and development. The purpose of the relationship describes the nature and qualities of a relationship (Biestek, 1957). For example, the purpose/objective of a client-social-worker relationship is totally different from a parent-child relationship. There is always a presence of an emotional component in a parent-child relationship, but it is absent in a client-social worker relationship. In addition to this, the professional relationship/bond between the client and professional social worker is provisional. Through this relationship between the social worker and client, the professional is helping the client and the client is the person who is in need of help and that help is provided by the professional. In contemporary times, the demand for social worker interventions is increasing and it is important to examine the purpose, elements and boundaries of the client-social worker relationship. This analysis will help us to assess the effectiveness

of professional relationships in dealing with the problems of individuals.

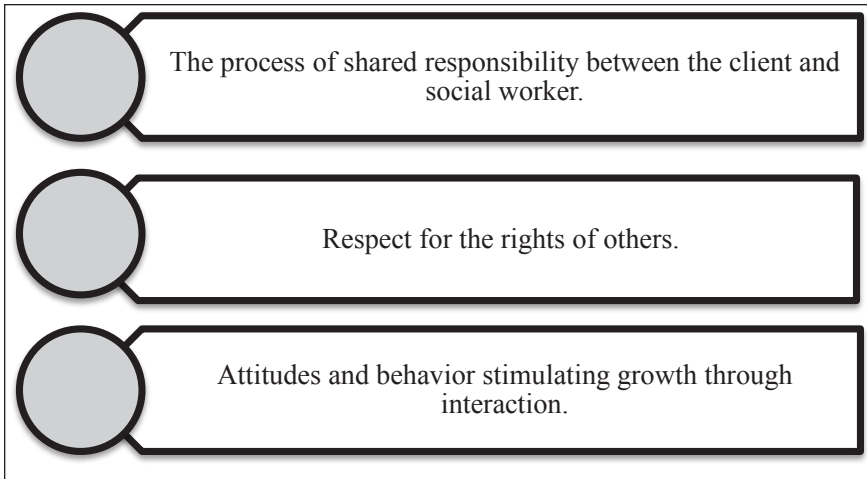
## OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

With this background, the major objective of this paper has been to conceptualise professional relationships in social work. In addition to this, an attempt has been made to examine trust as one of the important fundamentals of the social work profession. Efforts have also been made to highlight the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) and digitalisation on professional relationships in contemporary times. Lastly, the paper has tried to highlight the boundaries of professional relationships to safeguard the profession and client from any professional problems. For the purpose of this paper, secondary sources of data have been analysed. Different secondary sources like books, newspaper articles, journals and research reports have been selected for getting the data about the problem under scrutiny.

## CONCEPTUALISING PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS IN SOCIAL WORK

To understand about an individual, it is important to know about human behaviour. The client and social worker relationship is the channel through which the knowledge/information of the human nature or individual is transferred. Hennessey (2011) has stated that “Social Work is carried out within the network of human relationships.” The task of social work professionals is to deal with the problems faced by individuals due to their human relationships. Mishra (1994) had asserted that the client-social worker relationship “is the medium of treatment through which the client is enabled to find new ways of perceiving his problems and of handling himself.” Bhattacharya (2003) had highlighted that, “*it is a dynamic interaction of attitudes and emotions between the social worker and the client to help the client achieve a better adjustment between himself and his environment.*” The earlier literature has been full of information about the importance of relationships in social work because of their great importance in the helping process. The professional social workers have been getting engaged in a phenomenon that is today called a social work relationship. Prior to the 1930s in the literature of social work, it was apparent that very little interest was shown in defining this phenomenon.

The earliest term used for casework relationship was '*Friendship*,' but soon the vagueness of the term was felt by the American social workers and was replaced with a new term called '*Contact*.' Very soon the term '*Contact*' also lost favour as this term failed to recognise it as a two-way process and was not dynamic and continuing. '*Sympathy*' and '*Empathy*' were the other terms that replaced the term '*Contact*,' but these two terms were soon replaced by the term borrowed from psychology called '*Rapport*'. After getting quite popular with social workers for a long time, this term '*Rapport*' was further replaced with the introduction of the term '*Transfer*' into social work literature by Jessie Taft. But Virginia Robinson observed that the word/term '*Transfer*' was directly borrowed from psychiatric terminology and she believed that this resulted in the case worker again having a dependence upon another profession. The term relationship in social work was first used by Miss Virginia Robinson in her book titled, '*A Changing Psychology in Social Case Work*' in the year 1930". A social work relationship is defined as, "the professional meeting of two persons for the purpose of assisting one of them, i.e., the client, to make a better, a more acceptable adjustment to a personal problem" (Biestek, 1957). Gisela Konopka had highlighted the relationship between family and peer relationships: she had traced the development of the relationship from primary tie, i.e., from mother (primary caretaker) to early interaction with peers. It is the medium through which capabilities or potentials of the client are enhanced and organised by the social worker. This profession helps to enhance the capacities and skills of clients through socially constructed relationships and this relationship is called the soul of casework (Biestek, 1957; Mishra, 1994). According to Biestek (1957), "the good relationship is not only for the perfection, but also for the essence of the social work services." In its simplest form, a professional relationship in social work has been defined as a temporary association/bond between two or more persons for achieving the common purpose/goals or satisfaction of the needs of the client. When the relationship is established and is used by the social work professional consciously, purposefully and deliberately to help the client(s), it is called a professional relationship (Upadhaya, 2003). According to Hamilton (1940), the elements of a professional relationship involved:

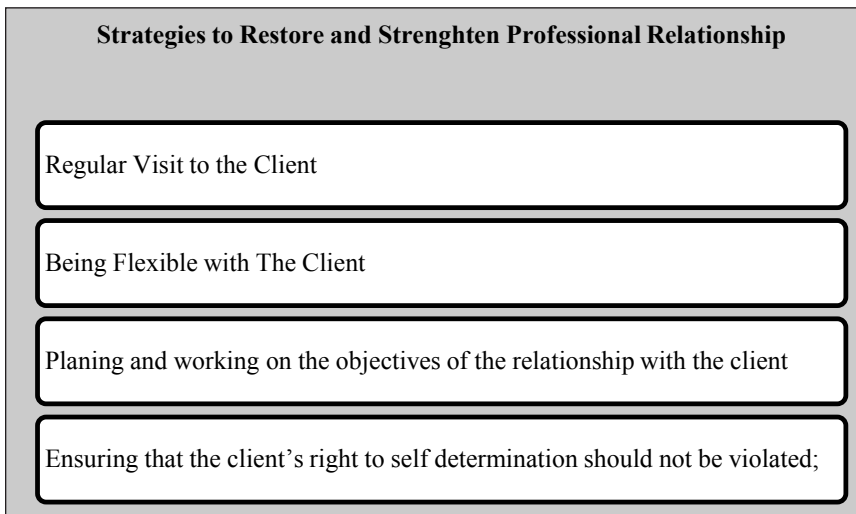


Source: Hamilton, G. (1951). *Theory and Practice of Social Case Work*. United Kingdom: New York School of Social Work, Columbia University.

**Fig. 1: Elements of Professional Relationship in Social Work**

Perlman (1957) had shared that the professional relationship is characterised by “conscious purposiveness and it help to achieve the goals related to clients’ problems.” Keith Lucas (1972) had described this professional relationship as “the medium which offered to people in trouble and through which they were allowed to make choices, both about taking help and the use they would make of it.” According to Northen (1969), a relationship consists “primarily of emotional responses which ebb and flow from person to person as human behaviour evokes different affective reactions.” Mishra (1994) had discussed the difference between professional and social relationships. According to him, the professional relationship was one in which a helper and helped in a limited-time relationship at the office or institution focused on the client’s needs and problems. This professional relationship ends when the problem is solved. On the other hand, the social relation is the one that is mutual and open-ended with no time limits at home and club, invitations and cinema focus on mutual satisfaction of a range of needs, i.e., emotional, social, intellectual, aesthetic, etc. One common question that arises here is whether all the client-social worker relationships are of the same nature. Suppose that in one case the client requires social service and in another case, the client is facing a problem in social functioning; then the client-social worker

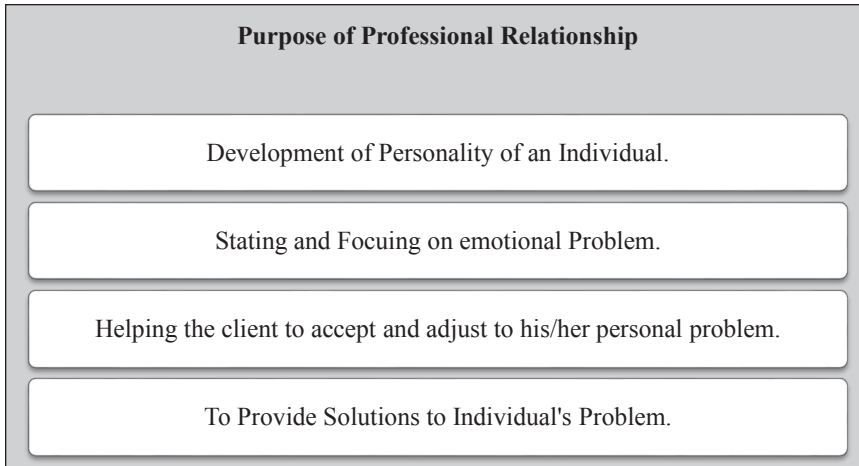
relationship should be of the same nature, or it should vary. Thus, we can say that the nature/strength of the professional relationship are dynamic and vary from situation to situation and it is always according to the needs of the client(s). It is also highlighted by Hamilton (1940) that the extent to which the client uses this professional relationship varies and it depends upon the kind and quality of his emotional needs. Northen and Kurland (2017) had stated that the differences in capacities, goals and needs of the clients resulted in variations in the pattern of professional relationships. If the social worker in the beginning faces a problem in establishing a relationship with a client, then the reengagement with the client is very difficult. Therefore, the social workers need to do a lot of hard work (efforts) so that the professional is able to establish a perfect first point of contact with the client (Maiter, Palmer & Manji, 2006). Wendy (2019), in his research paper, has highlighted various approaches and strategies used to strengthen a relationship with a client, which include:



Source: Rollins, Wendy (2019) Social Worker–Client Relationships: Social Worker Perspectives. Australian Social Work.

**Fig. 2: Strategies to Restore and Strengthen Professional Relationship**

The strength of the client-social worker relationship depends first on the professional and personal qualities of the social worker and second on the personal qualities of the client. To establish a productive client-social worker relationship, the first impression has always played a very crucial role. Second, how the client and social worker perceived each other has again played a vital role in this professional relationship. While building a professional relationship with the client, the social worker must be empathetic, respectful, responsible and attuned to challenges in the relationship (Wendy, 2019). Further, according to Heidegger (1978), “building a relationship is an emotionally demanding and evolving process that also offers the potential for healing, growth and enhanced capacity for engaging with others.” Okun (1982), from the psychological perspective, highlighted that the functioning style of a professional is influenced by personal characteristics, as both are inter-related. She had further in the year 1987 listed five important characteristics of a professional, which were important for this relationship and these characteristics happened to be self-awareness, honesty, congruence, ability to communicate and knowledge. According to Hennessey (2011) said that, “this relationship of the social worker with the client has a huge impact on the relationship of the social worker with himself, his self-image and his self-esteem.” Through this relationship, the social worker comes to know who he is through the way others treat him. On the other hand, Brown (1970), from a psychological perspective, shared that professionals enjoy working with clients who they think have the potential to change. Further, for maintaining the professional relationship, the client and other relevant people must be informed or updated about the planned or unplanned changes, as such monitoring leads to ‘we-ness’ with the client (Wendy, 2019). To bring the desired change in client truth, empathy, reliability and transparency are the essential elements of the client-social worker relationship (De Boer & Coady, 2007; Reimer, 2012). Northen and Kurland had highlighted that cultural factors like race, ethnicity and social class influenced the professional relationship in the group. But, when these differences are understood and appreciated, close relationships may develop for the benefit of all. According to Upadhyay (2003), the purpose of this relationship has been described as:



Source: Upadhyay, R. K. (2003). *Social Casework: A Therapeutic Approach*. Rawat: Jaipur.

### **Fig. 3: Purpose of Professional Relationship**

Mishra (1994) had shared that the main purpose of this client-case worker relationship was to deal with the psycho-social needs, better solutions to the client's problem, development of the personality and the solution of personal problems. According to Bhattacharya (2003), the purpose of the relationship was to help the client meet their psycho-social needs as well as to create an atmosphere in which the client felt free to engage effectively with the social worker.

## **TRUST: A NECESSARY FEATURE OF RELATIONSHIP**

Hamilton (1940) had suggested that a relationship takes place when the social worker and client work together. Social work interventions begin only when mutual confidence is established. The mutual confidence develops only when the client accepts their interest in him and conversely feels an interest in your trust. No doubt trust is one of the main building blocks/elements of this professional relationship between the client and social worker. A positive relationship is the basis for all social work interventions. Alexander and Charles (2009) says, "this professional relationship implied reciprocity because the construction of this relationship depended on both the sides i.e., client and social worker." Attachment theory, given

by Bowlby's and Erikson's theory of development, highlighted that trusting relationships early in life lead to building a base for better social functioning in adulthood (Christoph et al.). Hollis (1970) had highlighted some necessary ingredients (the worth and dignity of individuals, values of acceptance and self-determination and positive attitude towards the client) that make the client's willingness to exhibit trust. However, in a social worker and client relationship, trust is a necessary feature because it is important for the client to experience trust and to feel free to give a truthful/authentic account of his/her problem. It is one of the important ingredients to enable social work to work. In essence, the client's trust that what is revealed would be used in a manner that is helpful to the client and in his or her best interests.

According to Kutchins (1991), "the social worker-client relationship is a fiduciary relationship that is based on trust and used for the benefit of client." The Oxford Language Dictionary has defined 'fiduciary' as follows: involving trust, especially about the relationship between a trustee and a beneficiary. Earlier the fiduciary relationships/responsibilities/duties were articulated differently in different professional fields and were confusing and inconsistent. Despite the financial overtone in its historic development, the concept of fiduciary relationship had not been limited to economic activities (Kutchin, 1991). In contemporary times, a fiduciary relationship is an important concept in swiftly developing fields of law, medicine and social work. In social work, such a relationship is established when the client has faith, confidence and trust and there is a complete reliance of the client on the judgment and advice of the social worker. Because the professional has special expertise/skills, knowledge and techniques, thus the clients trust workers to act in their best interest. It is also essential that the social worker should be honest, truthful and sincere with the client to build the trust necessary for a fiduciary relationship.

Earlier literature had highlighted that in social work, the professional relationships are established on the basis of two types of contracts:

- Therapeutic Contract
- Professional Services Contract

The therapeutic contract in social work is a metaphor and is used to discuss goal setting and treatment related activities of the client. The actual legal contract between the client and the social worker is the professional service contract, which is based on payment for services and other working arrangements. But Croxton (1988) was of the view that this social worker-client relationship should not be based on the concept of

contract, but it should be built on trust, expertise, mutual understanding between the client and social worker and lastly the fiduciary obligations. By inducing fiduciary obligations/duties/responsibilities, the professional social workers can achieve a higher standard of conduct than usual. This type of relationship also safeguards the professional and client from problems and it also has a positive impact on the client.

### **Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Professional Relationship in Social Work**

The integration of AI in social work has significantly affected the professional relationship of the social workers with their clients. This advancement has, on one side, created new possibilities for efficiency and communication, while on the other has raised many challenges related to empathy and privacy. These technologies have made it easier for the social workers to manage their work by mechanisms of effective record keeping and connectivity through the advent of widened online platforms. Virtual meetings, digital forms and other AI tools not only help by saving time but also allow social workers to reach people who live in distant or far communities. Some mobile apps and chatbots take the technology integration to higher levels by providing basic support to clients anytime, helping them feel more connected to services. However, there are some important drawbacks as well. The human touch remains missing in this whole algorithm. Face-to-face conversations, body language, human warmth and emotional support are key important aspects in the field of social work and this may be reduced when interactions happen primarily through a screen. Privacy and confidentiality, which are at the heart of a strong social professional worker-client relationship, may be harder to retain in a digital setting, where the chances of tampering with confidential data are very high. Additionally, not all clients have access to phones, computers, or the internet, which can create an unfair barrier.

Moreover, in order to maintain the decorum of a professional setting, the social workers must be trained to use these upgraded digital tools wisely, effectively and ethically. Thus, AI and digitisation can improve the client-social work relationship in professional settings in many ways, but they should be used with care. The main values of social work—respect, understanding and human connection—must always come first. Technology should support, not replace, the human side of helping people. The challenge for social workers is to combine new digital tools with the

deep personal care that their clients need, thereby combining technology with compassion, ensuring that every client feels heard, understood and supported.

### **Boundaries in Professional Relationship**

Boundaries in professional relationships in social work are the expectations, rules and guidelines in the professional relationship. In all professional relationships, due to power imbalance, there is scope for discrimination and exploitation; similar situations/problems are also there in professional relationships in social work. To safeguard both, i.e., professions and clients, from such problems, professional boundaries are advocated. These boundaries are also very important to maintain and uphold the reputation and standard of any profession. Reamer (2003) had stated that professional boundaries were helpful to avoid clashes and to prevent clients from exploitation and harm. From the literature, it was found that in the UK the boundaries created for professional social work relationships were influenced by other professions (Patrick et al., 2012). The medical model is the base for the origin of this hierarchical or vertical type of professional relationship (Patrick et al., 2012). As a result of this, these professional boundaries were not completely aligned with the philosophy, values and ethical standards of this profession. The code of ethics of associations of many countries (National American Association of Social Workers, British Association of Social Workers) stated that the professional social worker must set and enforce appropriate boundaries. On the other side, these professional restrictions or boundaries are important to guide the professionals to effectively practice the profession, to protect the clients from incompetent and untrained professionals, to safeguard the social work professional from any kind of exploitation and litigation and lastly to facilitate the profession of social work. Therefore, for the purpose of this paper and to get an in-depth and multi-dimensional view of the boundaries in professional relationships, the code of ethics and various documents related to professional boundaries published by different associations and councils of the UK, USA, Australia and India have been critically examined and scrutinised. It is very clearly defined that the social workers should be fair, transparent and consistent while applying these professional boundaries. According to Flaker (2020), professional boundaries are developed automatically similarly to how they develop in the personal/daily life of the individuals. Ethical duties arise from all types of human relationships, whether they are personal,

familial, social, or professional. Connections between individuals are a crucial means for enacting change. The major goal of the social work professional is to improve the social relationship among individuals with the target to restore, maintain and promote the well-being of individuals, families, social groups, organisations and communities. The professional should communicate clearly with the client about the services offered, the associated risks and the limitations of those services. This interaction is professional and it is essential to obtain valid informed consent. Specifically, when working with particular groups of clients, such as children or adolescents, the professional social worker will convey their understanding of the risks, benefits and alternatives related to clinical services. After establishing this relationship, the social workers honour the client's rights to a 'trusting relationship,' 'privacy,' and 'the confidentiality of their information. According to the NAPSWI Code of Ethics from 2015, professional relationships should honor individuals' rights to self-determination, or to make their own decisions and these interactions should be grounded in respect for their rights. Any information obtained during the provision of professional services must remain confidential; if any of that information is utilised, it should be done responsibly and solely for the client's benefit. The NASW and AASW Code of Ethics (2020) explicitly states that "professionals should avoid establishing a professional relationship with individuals with whom they have had a prior sexual relationship." This boundary is crucial in maintaining appropriate professional limits and reducing the risk of potential harm to the individual. Additionally, the professional should entirely refrain from any physical interaction with the client, as differing cultural and gender perceptions may lead the client to interpret such contact differently, potentially harming this specialised relationship with the social worker. Furthermore, social workers must stay alert to the diverse ways in which clients and others might view physical touch. As stated by the National Association of Professional Social Workers in India (2015), professional social workers ought to take reasonable measures to assist clients who require services. In social work, there are often instances where it becomes necessary to either renegotiate or end the professional relationship, especially when it no longer meets the client's needs. When it becomes necessary to end or interrupt a professional relationship for either personal or professional reasons, social workers will aim to inform clients about the cessation of services and, when possible, provide guidance on alternative services and appropriate referrals. Additionally, the ethical code given

by NAPSWI (2015) recommends that social workers should conclude professional relationships with clients when the services and relationships are no longer needed. It is also the duty of the social worker to ensure that the professional relationship is not exploited for personal, financial, material, or sexual benefits, nor should they engage in an intimate or sexual relationship with the client's family members or significant others within two years of ending the professional relationship with the client. After the two-year period, if such a relationship is under consideration, the social worker must seek professional consultation and supervision to address issues related to power dynamics, the potential for exploitation or harm to the former client and the risks posed to the profession's reputation and standing.

In the end one can say that the clearly defined boundaries in professional relationships in social work are very important because they will protect the professional from unreasonable demands and expectations of the client, high work stress and burnout of the profession. These boundaries are helpful for the professional to provide professional and objective support to the client.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research paper highlights the critical role of professional relationships in the discipline of social work, with the prime focus on the characteristics, conduct, boundaries and ethical responsibilities that define professional interactions within this multi-disciplinary field. The relationship between a social worker and a client is vividly different from personal relationships due to its core intent, purpose, structure and the inherent power dynamics. The paper underscores that professional social work relationships are grounded in the pillars of empathy, trust and a deliberate ethical commitment to the well-being and autonomy of the client, giving the latter the utmost importance and care. In addition to that, the research paper also focuses on the concept of boundaries, which are essential to this field to maintain professionalism and proceed with a guided approach, such as confidentiality, respect for client autonomy and informed consent, that thereby serve as foundational principles, guiding social workers in establishing relationships that facilitate personal growth and social adjustment. Moreover, trust is identified as a cornerstone of effective social work relationships in creating a conducive environment for the client, enabling them to share openly and engage meaningfully

in the helping process. The fiduciary nature of this relationship requires social workers to act in such a way that they have to balance compassion with professional detachment, thereby proving that the field of social work is perhaps a blend of scientific practices encapsulated in a creative manner to cater to clients' best interest. Through examining codes of ethics and professional standards across various countries, this paper highlights a universal emphasis on setting clear, consistent boundaries that prioritise clients' rights and needs whilst providing aid in a professional space. Overall, by adhering to these principles and fostering ethical, purpose-driven relationships, social workers can effectively promote individual and societal well-being, thereby fulfilling the fundamental mission of social work. Unlike personal ties, these relationships are purpose-driven and structured, with clear set boundaries, which are crucial for maintaining professionalism and safeguarding both the client and the social worker from exploitation. While AI and digitalisation offer efficiency and extensive reach, they must be integrated carefully, as the irreplaceable human touch, which offers emotional support and face-to-face interaction is central to for effective implementation of social work. Therefore, it is recommended that social workers must be provided with immediate and comprehensive training on maintaining professional boundaries, maintaining ethical considerations in client relationships and on the grounds of ethical use of AI and digital tools, ensuring technology enhances for good rather than replacing the essential human element of their work. They must also develop strategies to preserve human connection in a digital age, potentially balancing virtual and in-person interactions and work to bridge the digital divide to ensure equitable access to services for all clients.

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