

Article

Silenced Coffee Rooms—The Changes in Social Capital within Social Workers' Work Communities during the First Wave of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Sanna Saraniemi , Timo Harrikari , Vera Fiorentino , Marjo Romakkaniemi and Laura Tiitinen 

Department of Social Work, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Lapland, P.O. Box 122, FI-96101 Rovaniemi, Finland; timo.harrikari@ulapland.fi (T.H.); vera.fiorentino@ulapland.fi (V.F.); marjo.romakkaniemi@ulapland.fi (M.R.); laura.tiitinen@ulapland.fi (L.T.)

* Correspondence: sanna.saraniemi@ulapland.fi

Abstract: The sudden outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing restrictive measures to combat infections led to a significant change in working life and social work within working communities. Workers had to switch to telecommuting quickly, which also affected the interactions between co-workers. In this research, we examined Finnish social workers' experiences of their work communities during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. We explored (1) how the restrictive measures affected social workers' work communities and (2) what types of factors promoted and challenged the cohesion of social networks and mutual trust between colleagues. The conceptual framework was based on social capital theory, in which social relations are seen as a resource of a community. The data utilised in the study were social workers' diaries ($n = 33$) written from mid-March until the end of May 2020. The data were analysed by a qualitative content analysis. The results highlight how the multilocation of work, fear of viral infection and varying attitudes towards the viral outbreak affected the interactions between colleagues in the early stages of the pandemic, increasing tensions and feelings of social distance between co-workers. The common professional value and knowledge base of social work, as well as remote work practices developed during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, supported interactions between colleagues. Although remote interaction options were developed, they could not, however, fully replace the advantages of face-to-face interactions and everyday informal encounters between colleagues, the importance of which is essential for developing and maintaining the social capital of work communities.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; social work; work communities; social capital



Citation: Saraniemi, S.; Harrikari, T.; Fiorentino, V.; Romakkaniemi, M.; Tiitinen, L. Silenced Coffee Rooms—The Changes in Social Capital within Social Workers' Work Communities during the First Wave of the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Challenges* **2022**, *13*, 8. <https://doi.org/10.3390/challe13010008>

Academic Editors: Satu Kalliola and Tuula Heiskanen

Received: 10 December 2021

Accepted: 23 February 2022

Published: 1 March 2022

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright: © 2022 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

In the early part of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic spread worldwide. In Finland, exceptional circumstances were declared on 16 March, and the Emergency Powers Act was introduced. This act contained extensive restrictions to combat the spread of the coronavirus which had significant social implications, extending to both work and private life. Education at different levels was quickly transferred to distance education, and the teleworking option was recommended, where possible. Public services reduced their operations, nonurgent services were cancelled and some services were implemented online. This also occurred in social work. The restrictions had significant impact on social work organisations and working methods and social work teams [1].

Social work and social services play a key role in times of crisis; they support the most vulnerable people who suffer most from the negative effects of crises [2–4]. Moreover, social services play a critical role in preparing for, responding to and recovering from crises in society [5,6]. The COVID-19 pandemic and the and the restrictions imposed to fight the virus affected both social workers and social work's service users. Therefore, it is important

to understand how social workers coped with a situation in which they faced significant challenges and were forced to adopt a new kind of adaptive governance [1,7].

The concept of adaptive governance is used to refer to the potential of social workers and social work organisations to respond to the challenges posed by crises and catastrophes. It means embracing ‘uncertainty by focusing on collaboration, flexibility and learning’ [7]. The allocation and strengthening of resources such as social capital have been seen as being essential to the mobilization of adaptive governance [8,9]. Social capital strengthens trust, resilience, reciprocity and exchange of information between community members [10] and thus helps the community overcome challenges, work together and mobilize common actions also in crisis situations.

There is a growing number of research studies of social work during the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been studied in areas such as social dimensions of pandemic [11], ethics [3], human rights and social justice [12], social work education [13], social worker’s resilience and mutual support [14,15], well-being at work [16] and the exploitation of digital tools [17]. There is less research of the meaning of the pandemic to social workers’ working communities. By the concept of work community, we stress a workplace as an arena where people meet each other regularly and where they have at least to some extent the same tasks, mission, purpose and work processes that have developed through working together. We see the workplace as an arena that contains and generates social capital, in which social networks and mutual trust are characteristic [18].

In the current article, we examine Finnish social workers’ experiences of their work communities during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. We aimed to answer two questions: (1) How did the restrictive measures affect social workers’ work communities? (2) What types of factors challenged and promoted the cohesion of social networks and mutual trust between colleagues? The conceptual framework of the study was based on social capital theory [10,19,20]. The data consisted of diaries ($n = 33$) written by social workers from mid-March to the end of May 2020. The diaries were analysed using a qualitative content analysis. Research questions describe what was searched for in the data by using the content analysis.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Social Workers’ Working Communities and Collegial Support

In studies on the well-being and coping of social workers, relations with colleagues, collegial support and trust among colleagues have been identified as crucial work-related resources [21,22]. Social work communities offer practical support for knowledge formation and decision making while supporting employees’ professional development and growth. In addition to practical support, social work communities can provide emotional support for their members [15,23,24]. Social workers face burdensome and ethically challenging issues in their work; in these contexts, both collegial support and reflection are essential in managing these issues. Furthermore, collegial support can strengthen the resilience and competence of social workers and help them face the pressure, stress and problematic emotions associated with work while helping address the work-related unpredictability that is typical of social work [25].

Social work teams have been described as secure bases and safe places for their employees [23]. The role of collegial support is essential when supporting new and newly graduated social workers [15,26]. The possibility of face-to-face encounters and low-threshold interactions between employees during the working day, such as coffee table discussions, have been regarded as important for mobilising collegial support [15,27,28]. Thus, it is crucial to explore how the restrictive measures affected supportive interactions between colleagues in the pandemic context where, for example, face-to-face encounters were restricted.

According to previous research, the pandemic has had both negative and positive consequences on the quality of working life and well-being of social workers. On the other hand, the changes brought by the pandemic have reduced work-related stress when, for

example, remote working has brought more flexibility to working days. On the other hand, rapid changes in working practices have increased social workers' workload as well as the challenges in balancing work and family life during the lockdown [1,2,16]. Previous studies highlight the importance of collegial support in helping social workers to support their clients also during crisis that affects their personal lives as well [14–16].

Several studies on the impact of the pandemic on social work teams suggest that teams can serve as a source of support for social workers when working remotely [14,15]. However, superiors and organisations have an important role in enabling social support and promoting interactions between employees, for example, by securing options to interact online [15]. Some studies [15,29] have focused on how novice and inexperienced employees can survive and become a part of the work community without collegial support and daily face-to-face encounters in integrating them into the work community. These concerns are noteworthy because the experiences of isolation and loneliness, increased workload and lack of sufficient interactions have long been noticed in studies reporting employees' experiences about teleworking in the early stages of the pandemic [30].

2.2. *The Social Capital of Work Communities*

Finnish social workers' experiences of their work communities were analysed by utilising social capital theory. Social capital is usually conceptualized as referring to how social networks enable individual and communal goals which would not be achieved without those networks. Social capital is a communal based resource, 'public good', that is located in the relationship between people [10,31]. Putnam [18] (pp. 664–665) defines social capital as a feature of social life that is similar to trust, norms and networks 'that enables participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives'. Social capital, both as an individual and community resource, is crucial in explaining the capacity of work communities, well-being, coping, professional growth and the development of employees. The studies suggest that an appropriate level of social capital in the work community can prevent burnout [32], increase job satisfaction, add job engagement [33,34] and promote achieving working goals [35]. In particular, the role of mobilising social capital is pivotal when work communities face crises. Here especially, social capital can strengthen and support the resilience and recovering capacity of work communities [8].

Nahapiet and Ghoshal [20] (p. 243) define social capital as 'the sum of the actual and potential resources embedded within, available through and derived from the network possessed by an individual or social unit'. With social capital, resources and knowledge move between colleagues, and the everyday life of the work communities runs smoothly. Nahapiet and Ghoshal [20] suggest that social capital is an enabling resource for work communities, which, in this case, is located in the connections and social relationships between co-workers. Thus, regular social relations, interactions and communication are essential for the development and maintenance of social capital [10,19,20].

Moreover, Nahapiet and Ghoshal [20] suggest that social capital can be analysed through three interrelated dimensions: structural, cognitive and relational dimensions, each of which can open up different facets of social capital. The structural dimension refers to the presence of the links or ties between agents that allow access to the members, for example, to exchange and combine knowledge in a particular social system. The structural dimension of social capital has been studied especially in the area of network analysis. Thus, the main interest in the structural dimension lies in the pattern of linkages between the agents of certain social systems, and the essential question is: who achieves whom and how [20,36,37]? The cognitive dimension, in turn, includes resources in the social system that arise from commonly shared codes, meanings, narratives, representations, symbols and interpretations, such as a shared understanding of the common values, norms and working goals and tasks between colleagues [20].

The third dimension of social capital, the relational one, refers to the quality and nature of ongoing personal relationships between members of a certain social system who have evolved over time in the interaction between team members, such as friendship, trust and

communality [20,35]. The relational dimension can also be referred to as ‘strong ties’ [37] or bonding social capital [31] that link to the relationships between the members of the group, which are characterised by trust, norms, obligations and identification. These characteristics may have many advantages to the group’s performance, and they can motivate group members to act together [20]. As Meng et al. [34] point out, the triangular division of social capital introduced by Nahapiet and Ghoshal highlights the multidimensional nature of social capital, how each of the dimensions contributes in its own way to the performance of a certain social network [35].

Developing and maintaining social capital is influenced by time, interaction, interdependence and group closure. For example, the formation of norms, values and shared codes promoting trust, which is a key element of social capital, requires stability and a continuity of interactions. The concept of mutual interdependence presumes that social capital in a group becomes stronger the more the members of the group depend on each other and the more support they receive. Interaction lies at the heart of social capital, and social capital needs regular interaction to be maintained and to develop. Finally, closure refers to how strong group identity and firmness strengthen social capital [10,19,20].

3. Methodology of the Study: Data, Ethics and Method

The aim of the current research was to analyse the changes in collegial support and social capital of social workers’ work communities during a time when work communities confronted many challenges because of the restrictions imposed to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. We answer two questions: (1) How did the restrictive measures affect social workers’ work communities? (2) What types of factors challenged and promoted the cohesion of social networks and mutual trust between colleagues? The data consisted of diaries ($n = 33$) written by social workers from 15 March to 31 May. In mid-March 2020, the research team launched data collection and submitted a diary writing request on a closed social media group for social work professionals. Frontline social workers were asked to write a diary about their experiences and views on the impact of the pandemic on their clients and the challenges arising from their work. The diary was instructed to be written based on three questions: (1) What kinds of observations and experiences do you have about the phenomena and challenges that occur in the lives of social work clients during the pandemic? (2) What challenges do social work and its practices face during a pandemic? (3) What kind of thoughts does the pandemic period evoke in you as a social work professional? The authors of the diaries were instructed to write in a free-form manner but to mark the dates of their writings and send the completed journals to the research group at the end of May. In total, fifty-six social work professionals declared their interest to write their diaries. Finally, thirty-three diaries were returned to the encrypted project e-mail by legalised social workers, with a few social work students among the participants. Most of them wrote a diary on day-to-day basis, some of them week-by-week. The participants worked in different areas of social work, with adults, elderly care, child protection, disabled people, immigrants and addictions. All entries were deemed to be eligible for analysis. In total, 94,139 words were collected.

In terms of research ethics and ethical reviews, the research team followed the guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity [38]. Before sending the diaries, the participants were informed by a specific letter that sending the diaries to the research team meant giving one’s informed consent. Moreover, the participants were told, for example, about their right to withdraw, secure data storing and processing practices, which ensured that no individual agents or units would be identifiable in the forthcoming publications. The background information collected from the participants was limited to age, gender, education, current job title and the main client target group with which the participant worked. Diaries were written as individual legalised social workers, not as representatives of certain working organisations, so further background information related to institutions was not collected.

For the current study, the diary data were analysed using NVivo data analysis software. In the first phase of the analysis, the data were read carefully, and all descriptions related to the work communities were extracted from the data (173 notes). During the second phase, a qualitative content analysis was used to code and organise the collected notes, hereby referring to work communities. Finally, a theory-driven quality content analysis was used to analyse the three dimensions of social capital—structural, cognitive and relational—introduced by Nahapiet and Ghoshal [20]. When analysing the structural dimension of social capital, reading the data focused on descriptions of the concrete relationship structures in the work communities and the changes that happened in them during the first phases of the pandemic. When analysing the cognitive dimension, the reading of the data concentrated on the descriptions of the shared and conflicting values and codes of the working communities. Finally, when analysing the relational dimension of social capital, the reading of the data focused on the descriptions of the collegial and emotional support. We used the triangular division of social capital as an analytical tool for highlighting the essential features of the social capital of work communities. These dimensions of social capital are inseparably intertwined [20]. In the following, the results of the analysis are presented through three subchapters, each opening up a specific perspective on the function of social capital in work communities from mid-March until the end of May 2020. We first address the impact of the exceptional circumstances on the structural dimension, then the impact on the cognitive dimension and then the impact on the relational dimension of social capital.

4. Results

4.1. Tricky Rhythms and Fading Structures of Workplace Interactions

We first analyse the impact of the restrictions on the communal structures and links through which interaction and collegial support become realised in work communities. When speaking about structure, we refer to the relationship structures of the work community, which consist of the linkages and ties between the colleagues who make collegial interaction and support possible [20,37]. In their diaries, the social workers described how conversations, reflection and information exchange took place between colleagues spontaneously before the pandemic. Colleagues met face to face, for example, in the hallways of the workplace, coffee rooms and lunch tables. However, working remotely changed the structures and systems of inter-employee communication:

Among colleagues, we discuss the impact of teleworking on the interaction of the work community among the colleagues. We noted that we miss our colleagues and the exchange of words, enquiries and personal views while passing by each other.

(D6/31/03/20)

The regular and stable interaction that is essential for developing and maintaining social capital [20] was challenged by the fact that the devices and software needed for remote connections and interactions, such as laptops, microphones or applications, were not necessarily available, especially at the early stages of the pandemic. In addition, not every employee had the necessary expertise to use the equipment needed for remote access:

We don't have the tools that would make it possible, for example, to organise a team meeting online. (D18/21/03/20)

The restrictive measures were manifested in a very concrete manner. They did not concern only an overall recommendation to shift to remote work, but also claims to stay at home, even in the case of minor flu symptoms, and to keep physical distance while meeting other people. Some social workers shifted to work remotely from home; consequently, the work communities were dissolved to different places. The change was significant because remote working had been rare in Finnish social work before the pandemic. To minimise physical contact, co-workers had to begin to work in different shifts and rhythms. For example, some of the employees were in the workplace on certain days of the week, and others worked remotely at the same time. In their diaries, the social workers described the

atmosphere in the workplaces as quiet and ‘ghostly’, as workers were dispersed to work in different places.

On Monday, a staff meeting was held in the workplace. We all were divided into own offices, and only some places had more than one person in the same space. It was quiet—there was guidance to reduce social contacts further in the workplace and to call or send a message even to the next room. (D24/09/04/20)

Today, we prepared the split of our multiprofessional team into two teams to minimise the risk of infection. Half of the group is working remotely for a week, and the other half is at the office, after which the roles will be changed. (D22/31/03/20)

In addition to formal encounters, such as team meetings, the restrictions had a significant impact on informal encounters between colleagues, such as hallway discussions or meetings at coffee tables or lunch. One key measure of co-workers’ ‘normal’ interaction—‘happy talk’ in the coffee room—quieted down during the first wave of the pandemic. Shifts for meals were distributed in a new way so that not everyone was eating their lunch in the coffee room at the same time. Opportunities for interaction decreased as restaurants and workplace canteens closed their doors. In many respects, the restrictions changed the everyday structures, spaces and rhythms of the work communities on which interactions and encounters enabling collegial support and social capital were based [15,20]:

No one goes near another person to sit down, and the coffee room is not filled with happy conversations during a lunch break. No one goes to the store to pick up lunch, but everyone eats their own snacks. The facial expressions are serious; the atmosphere is quiet. If there is something to do with someone else, people send a message or take a Skype call, even if the other one is in the next room. There is a clear fear of physical contact in the air. (D9)

We have reflected together on how to share lunch shifts so that we would not all be so close to each other around the same table at the same time. This arouses a lot of emotions in people. (D30)

Moreover, the fear of viral infection related to physical encounters had a major impact on co-workers’ interactions and the dynamics of working communities. The avoidance of physical encounters was partly reinforced by a lack of adequate guidance on protection. There were no protective devices available, such as masks and hand disinfectants, especially at the early stages of the pandemic:

—Talking to a co-worker feels normal for a while, but I get scared when someone passes by me too close. Meeting clients in a large room felt safe, and all the participants seemed healthy. (D16/25/03/20)

However, soon after the initial shock phase, the structures and linkages enabling interactions between colleagues began to reorganise. Physical encounters were replaced or accompanied by remote encounters, such as remote team meetings, remote morning coffees or remote Friday pizzas via Skype. The social workers described how remotely held meetings and gatherings became an essential part of the everyday life of the work communities during the exceptional circumstances.

We start the day together by sharing cases via Skype. [. . .] In addition to that [. . .], we have started [. . .] an afternoon ‘reflection session’ involving anyone who is able to join or has something to share with others. It’s been a good practice. (D21/08/04/20)

For maintaining social capital, it was important to find common working rhythms and structures that could enable temporally synchronised encounters. Finding a common rhythm when working remotely was helped by structured and scheduled encounters, such as regular remote morning meetings. Later on, the shared, temporal and spatial structure of work communities, which broke down in the early stages of the pandemic, began to reshape and take new forms.

4.2. Shared Professional Values and Knowledge, Conflicting Perceptions and Orientations towards Viral Outbreak

The restrictions had an impact on the cognitive dimension of social capital—that is, the shared language, codes and values of the working community [20]. In social work, ethical codes and knowledge bases form a strong basis for professional reflection and decision-making processes. Based on an analysis of the data, the values and professional knowledge shared jointly by colleagues were one of the key forces holding colleagues together and confirming the social capital of the work community during the early stages of the pandemic. The values and ethics of social work constituted the common basis, which directed the social work teams' work and acted as 'the compass', helping colleagues navigate in the same direction, maintaining trust, a sense of belonging and, above all, the ability to move forward in the middle of the crisis. Common goals for client orientation, securing clients' well-being and supporting them in times of crisis helped employees guide and reshape their operations in the same direction and keep the members of the work community together [1,19]. In addition, the crisis orientation of social work directed the work communities' activities to ensure that the virus would not spread during client meetings. In this way, the crisis bound workers together, strengthening their sense of belonging:

It seems that our working group has been welded together by the crisis and everyone is trying to do their best as part of the group. On the other hand, I feel that the job descriptions of the employees are dispelled when the joint goal is to take a catch from the situations and coping of clients. On the other hand, competence and different job descriptions are emphasised to make the work smooth. Employees are motivated to protect clients so that the virus does not spread and there would not be a public health threat. (D22/23/03/20)

Competing perceptions and conflicting interpretations and attitudes towards viral outbreaks and the restrictions caused misunderstandings between colleagues and increased tensions in the work communities, thus eroding their social capital. The social workers described how some of their workmates did not appear to take the virus and the claim to restrict social contacts as seriously as others. When some colleagues isolated themselves in their rooms, others continued to take coffee breaks, going about with 'business as usual'. With varying individual orientations and reactions to the viral outbreak and contradictory instructions, there was no longer certainty that colleagues were acting in the same direction and with the same goal and orientation:

Sometimes, it feels that the situation is not taken seriously enough in the workplace. Meetings of more than 10 people, for example, have still taken place since the restrictions came into force and safety distances are not always followed. In general, I wonder how this can affect the working atmosphere if some people take the epidemic more seriously than others. (D15/20/03/20)

Hence, varying worker orientations towards the severity of viral outbreak while performing client work pulled members of work teams in different directions and eroded trust between colleagues. In their diaries, the social workers described how fear of viral infection and different attitudes towards the virus and crisis undermined the feelings of security and trust on which social capital and social support were built in working communities [20].

It was clear that I wasn't wanted at the office, and I didn't want to have to wonder if I could infect people myself. (D5/24/04/20)

The transition to remote working mode caused disagreements and lines of battle between colleagues [3]. Because there were no clear policies and instructions in the workplace at the beginning of the pandemic, the employees felt left alone with their decisions on whether to attend meetings with colleagues or with clients remotely or face to face:

[. . .] a downright, shocking day at work. The co-workers were divided into two camps. There were those of us who sought to make solution-oriented proposals on how to minimise the burden on the system. In remote work, we would reduce the exposure to infections when we were not physically involved with each other and there would be no commuting—The other part of the working team included a superior and a few others who felt that our reactions and proposals were completely new, surprising and confusing—in my experience, those of us who talked about it felt labelled as hysterics who were just afraid of their own health. (D18/21/03/20)

I'm going to make the decision to attend a meeting with medical doctors remotely. I face critically minded feedback from the other members of the team: 'why on earth'. There were 15 people attending the meeting. I wonder, where is our view now on the limit of 10 people?—(D10/week13/20)

Furthermore, the atmosphere between co-workers suffered from the fact that, despite the restrictions, some members of the work community were still forced to continue face-to-face encounters and be physically in the workplace, while others were allowed and able to shift to remote working. The unequal distribution of remote working opportunities caused experiences of injustice between colleagues. This raised concerns about whether the social distance between employees working remotely and those working in the workplace had decreased:

[. . .] I feel injustice towards those who are working remotely. For everyone, this is not possible either because of the nature of the work or because of the material resources. (D6/13/05/20)

4.3. Promoting Collegial Support through New Channels

In the first phases of COVID-19 pandemic, the structure of the social ties between workmates in social work teams collapsed, and contradictions became evident in the middle of the crisis. However, new ways to come together were intensively sought (structural dimension). The shared professional codes (cognitive dimension) maintained trust between colleagues, prevented teams from breaking down and protected single employees from exhaustion. In addition, the relational dimension of social capital, here referring to strong, emotional and reciprocal ties between colleagues, suffered from remote working practices, shortcomings in digital devices and skills and competing attitudes towards the viral outbreak. After the initial shock phase, however, alternative interaction options, such as remote coffee breaks, were introduced to mobilise collegial and emotional support:

From the point of view of one's own work and well-being at work, teamwork and support have decreased because one part of the work team is always working remotely. On the other hand, contact has been maintained and support is available; if necessary, the means are only different. (D1/31/05/20)

[. . .] being remotely with colleagues has also been very functional. We just had an office meeting of over 10 people, and teams are also held on Skype. We've also always had morning coffee together via Skype. (D4/26/03/20)

Although alternative opportunities for interaction were developed, the social workers emphasised the relevance of regular face-to-face interactions as the primary condition for collegial support. In their diaries, among other things, the authors described how opportunities for common ad hoc reasoning decreased despite remote connections when colleagues were no longer meeting face to face in the workplace. Moreover, the threshold for disturbing co-workers heightened because there was no accurate information on the colleagues' schedules and they may no longer work in the same temporal rhythm, such as having coffee and lunch breaks at the same time etc. [15]. The key challenges of work discussed and 'brainstormed' previously among colleagues during working days were increasingly left to single workers to resolve. Considering these questions alone led to an increased workload because the workers did not want to make a phone call and disturb their colleagues.

In a very concrete manner, the social workers described how work issues stayed in their minds after the working day because there were no options to discuss and consider them face to face with colleagues during the day. They expressed their feelings of social distance, isolation and loneliness and how ‘something’ was now ‘missing from the job’. The social workers missed being together, non-work-related small talk and coffee table debates providing spontaneous collegial support that formal online team meetings could not fulfil. As one of the social workers pointed out: ‘Without being together, nothing’s going to work’ (D 17/29/05/20). The importance of daily informal encounters with colleagues as a source of social capital was described:

[. . .] working remotely has brought a lot of loneliness to working, and colleagues seem to me more distant than before. In addition, the differences in working methods and attitudes towards the epidemic have brought a negative atmosphere to the work community. The majority is of the idea of keeping physical contact with others so that we can discharge client cases and consider things together (D4/06/05/20)

I’m getting tired of working remotely. It’s hard to get things done when you must strain everything out of yourself. You can’t receive any support from others. (D2/15/04/20)

In a work community where some employees worked remotely and some were at the office, those working remotely started to become ‘invisible’. Parallel experiences concerned attending hybrid and remote meetings as well. From this point of view, the hybrid model developed was not, at least in all respects, a viable arrangement for collegial support, even though it allowed participation in meetings through remote connections.

I am participating in work counselling remotely, even though most of my co-workers are on site. I feel frustration with low coverage and being an outsider. I would have had something to say, but I cannot manage to take part in conversation. (D/6/25/05/20)

As Cook et al. [15] (p. 264) highlight, ‘the loss of office base’ and disappearance of regular face-to-face interactions was challenging not only for recently qualified social workers and new workers but also for less-established teams. These employee clusters lost many learning possibilities that the physical office base could provide, so it became more difficult for them to form relationships with colleagues and identify themselves as a part of the work community. Hereby, the teams with existing strong ties between their members managed better in the crisis, thus demonstrating and confirming the adequacy of social capital theory [15,39]. More broadly, the social workers regarded the daily face-to-face interactions with colleagues as being so important that the physical restrictions made them wonder how their closest colleagues could cope and continue working without daily encounters.

At this stage, I first and foremost missed the work community of social workers, where I could participate in professional debates to develop my own reflections. However, I ended up working alone. (D24/09/04/20)

The relations with colleagues are starting to break down because we didn’t know each other well, and we are very different. There is no longer a facilitating cooperation as usual, which leads to a widening gap between us. (D17/20/04/20)

The disappearance of face-to-face encounters led to increasing misunderstandings between colleagues because gestures and facial expressions, crucial to face-to-face interaction, as well as nonverbal communication, were missing from encounters carried out through remote connections. As Cook et al. [15] point out, it is crucial for successful virtual interactions to determine how well established the work community was before switching to remote access mode. Thus, strong social capital that had formed in the work community before the pandemic helped the team survive better through the crisis [40].

It is easy to interpret the withdrawal from interaction as a sign of personal assault [. . .] Some fundamental questions seem to arise—such as I am valuable and respected or not, whether I belong to community or not, etc. There are a huge number of misinterpretations in what other people say, and there is no time or the appropriate context to correct them. (D30/May/20)

5. Discussion

In the present article, we analysed Finnish social workers' experiences of their work communities during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. This was analysed through diary data written by social workers from mid-March until the end of May 2020. The essential roles of social work and social services in time of crisis were the starting point of our analysis. It can be said that in time of crisis social services act as a last tailboard of society: they support the most vulnerable people and moreover have a critical role for the surviving of the whole society [3–5]. In time of crisis and catastrophes, governance systems need the ability to modify their practices, learn and have capacity to respond to the change and uncertainty [7]. To the mobilization of adaptive governance, the allocation and strengthening of resources such as social capital have been seen as being essential [8,9]. In our study we conceptualised social capital as a community resource that is located in the relationship between people and which helps the community to work together and to overcome challenges [10,31]. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for a new kind of adaptive governance was also highlighted by the fact that social workers and their work communities faced the crisis by themselves too [1,7].

As the analytical framework, we utilised Nahapiet and Ghoshal's triangular division of social capital, making it possible to bring the essential features of social capital of working communities and their changes during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic to light. In many ways, the analysis of the data highlights how the dimensions of structural, cognitive and relational capital were inseparably intertwined and interlinked and in dialectical relationship with each other. How, for example, the trust between colleagues is intertwined with the concrete possibilities for daily interactions between colleagues.

First of all, our analysis suggests that restrictions on physical contacts between colleagues, a lack of adequate digital equipment and fear of and confronting attitudes towards viral outbreaks created social distance and hit the core element of social capital hard: the regular and low-threshold informal interaction and encounters between colleagues. According to the results, self-evident everyday structures and practices, such as shared spaces and synchronised working rhythms allowing ad hoc type encounters, emerged as the crucial factors for maintaining social capital [19].

Moreover, the common professional value and knowledge base, as well as the novel informal remote work practices, supported the maintenance of social capital in working communities. The results highlight the importance of shared language and codes in the formation of social capital among the work community [20]. When there are, for example, varying interpretations of common goals, conflicts tend to arise in a way that erodes social capital.

Finally, the results highlight the importance of regular and stable face-to-face interactions, which are essential for developing and maintaining social capital and which remote interaction could not fully replace. When face-to-face interactions between colleagues began to diminish suddenly because of the restrictions, the expressions of feelings of loneliness, social distance and isolation started to emerge in the diaries [30,32]. Everyday informal interactions between colleagues tend to bind them together and offer options for them to form the network closures necessary for creating social capital [10,19]. In addition, informal encounters seem to help new employees become a part of the work community and become involved in the formation of social capital in the work community [15].

The findings of the study confirm the results of the previous studies on the importance of social capital as an essential element in the adaptive governance of communities during crises and catastrophes [7–9]. The analysis brings into the light the ability and flexibility of

social workers and social work working communities to mobilize and adapt their resources—in this case, their social capital to respond and to survive during the crisis [1]. The results of the study highlight that, after an initial shock phase, social work working communities quickly started to modify their actions and, for example, alternative interaction options were introduced to mobilise social capital to cope with the crisis and to be able to support each other and clients. The role of shared professional codes, the strong ethical base of social work and social workers' strong commitment to support their clients proved to be essential when maintaining and confirming the social capital of working communities when confronting sudden crisis.

Exchanging views and collegial negotiations are an essential part of work team dynamics, but the results also highlight the importance of organising possibilities for informal encounters of employees in the context of working remotely or through a hybrid model, as has also been highlighted in previous studies [14,15]. Especially in times of crisis, it is decisive to ensure that social workers have access to the social support provided by their colleagues because the ties and bonds in the work community prior to a pandemic can help them survive through the crisis and are an essential part of a working community's ability to mobilise common actions [8,10,15].

6. Conclusions

In terms of the dimensions noted by Nahapiet and Ghoshal [20], it seems that all three elements of social capital—structural, cognitive and relational—interrelate, affect and interact with each other. On the one hand, when the physical, spatial and temporal structures enabling colleagues to communicate in everyday settings are called into question, experiences of social distancing, isolation and mistrust between colleagues tend to arise. On the other hand, the shared professional value and knowledge base can help the work community throughout the crisis, guiding the group's activities in the same direction, even in cases where communication structures collapse abruptly. Overall, the analysis of the data shows how social capital is in constant movement and prone to change if any of its elements are subjects of change.

In creating and supporting opportunities for remote or hybrid interactions, organisations seem to play a decisive role, which is reflected also in social workers' diaries [15,23]. First, it is evident that if the digital equipment and applications do not function or there is no know-how on how to utilise them, interacting remotely will not succeed, and the social capital in the work communities will start to crumble. In other words, regular interaction is very difficult to maintain without enabling structures. In addition, social work organisations, their culture and their commitment to encouraging a positive atmosphere for teleworking plays a key role in mobilising online spaces for interaction. In times of crisis, these multiple channels can promote common goals and offer access to social capital and network closures for newly qualified social workers, as well as other new members of the work community.

7. Limitations

There are certain limitations related to the data. First, the authors of the diary data consisted of a group of social workers especially willing to reflect on their experiences through writing. Second, the data were collected at the very beginning of the pandemic, when shifting to teleworking in social work was just starting and, for example, multichannel interaction options were not as developed as later on. However, the early pandemic diary data can remind us how thorough the change was and how the work teams reacted to the change—one that permeated the temporal and spatial structures and well-established patterns of everyday interactions. Above all, our analysis shows how various collegial capacities were adopted, teams adapted quickly to the forced change and social work communities started to self-organise themselves in the middle of the large-scale and unexpected global crisis.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, writing—original draft preparation: S.S., T.H., V.F. and M.R.; data collection: S.S., T.H., M.R. and L.T. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: Writing this article was supported by the Academy of Finland, The Strategic Research Council grant 335656/2020 and The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health grant VN/25259/2020.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were waived for this study due to the study not requiring ethical reviewing according to the guidelines of the Finnish National Board on research Integrity TENK.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data will be archived in the Finnish Social Science Data Archive. The data is not visible in archive yet.

Acknowledgments: The authors would like to thank the social workers for writing their diaries, the administrators of the Finnish social work career network for enabling data collection and the COVID-19 Social Work Research Forum for supportive debates during 2020–2021. The authors would also like to thank research assistant Tuomas Leppiaho for all his help with editing the article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

1. Harrikari, T.; Romakkaniemi, M.; Tiitinen, L.; Ovaskainen, S. Pandemic and social work: Exploring Finnish social workers' experiences through a SWOT analysis. *Br. J. Soc. Work* **2021**, *51*, 1644–1662. [[CrossRef](#)]
2. Ashcroft, R.; Sur, D.; Greenblatt, A.; Donahue, P. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on social workers at the frontline: A survey of Canadian social workers. *Br. J. Soc. Work* **2021**, 1–23. [[CrossRef](#)]
3. Banks, S.; Cai, T.; de Jonge, E.; Shears, J.; Shum, M.; Sobočan, A.M.; Strom, K.; Truell, R.; Úriz, M.J.; Weinberg, M. Practising ethically during COVID-19: Social work challenges and responses. *Int. Soc. Work* **2020**, *63*, 569–583. [[CrossRef](#)]
4. Tierney, K. Resilience and the neoliberal project: Discourses, critiques, practices—And Katrina. *Am. Behav. Sci.* **2015**, *59*, 1327–1342. [[CrossRef](#)]
5. Mathbor, G.M. Enhancement of community preparedness for natural disasters: The role of social work in building social capital for sustainable disaster relief and management. *Int. Soc. Work* **2007**, *50*, 357–369. [[CrossRef](#)]
6. Romakkaniemi, M.; Harrikari, T.; Saraniemi, S.; Tiitinen, L.; Fiorentino, V. 'Bonding, bridging and linking the last resort tailboard': Shifts in social workers' professional positions and mobilizing adaptive capital during the coronavirus pandemic. *Nord. Soc. Work Res.* **2021**, 1–14. [[CrossRef](#)]
7. Walch, C. Adaptive governance in the developing world: Disaster risk reduction in the State of Odisha, India. *Clim. Dev.* **2019**, *11*, 238–252. [[CrossRef](#)]
8. Hawkins, R.L.; Maurer, K. Bonding, bridging and linking: How social capital operated in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina. *Br. J. Soc. Work* **2010**, *40*, 1777–1793. [[CrossRef](#)]
9. Rapeli, M. Social capital in social work disaster preparedness plans: The case of Finland. *Int. Soc. Work* **2018**, *61*, 1054–1066. [[CrossRef](#)]
10. Coleman, J.S. Social capital in the creation of human capital. *Am. J. Sociol.* **1988**, *94*, S95–S120. [[CrossRef](#)]
11. Wang, K.Y.-T.; Wen-Hui, T.; Chuang, T.Y.; Lee, H.-J. Rethinking four social issues of the COVID-19 pandemic from social work perspectives. *Asia Pac. J. Soc. Work Dev.* **2021**, *31*, 45–51. [[CrossRef](#)]
12. Anand, J.C.; Donnelly, S.; Milne, A.; Nelson-Becker, H.; Vingare, E.L.; Deusdad, B.; Cellini, G.; Kinni, R.L.; Pregno, C. The covid-19 pandemic and care homes for older people in Europe—Deaths, damage and violations of human rights. *Eur. J. Soc. Work* **2021**, 1–12. [[CrossRef](#)]
13. Morley, C.; Clarke, J. From crisis to opportunity? Innovations in Australian social work field education during the COVID-19 global pandemic. *Soc. Work Educ.* **2020**, *39*, 1048–1057. [[CrossRef](#)]
14. Cabiati, E. Social workers helping each other during the COVID-19 pandemic: Online mutual support groups. *Int. Soc. Work* **2021**, *64*, 676–688. [[CrossRef](#)]
15. Cook, L.L.; Zschomler, D.; Biggart, L.; Carder, S. The team as a secure base revisited: Remote working and resilience among child and family social workers during COVID-19. *J. Child. Serv.* **2020**, *15*, 259–266. [[CrossRef](#)]
16. McFadden, P.; Ross, J.; Moriarty, J.; Mallett, J.; Schroder, H.; Ravalier, J.; Manthorpe, J.; Currie, D.; Harron, J.; Gillen, P. The role of coping in the wellbeing and work-related quality of life of UK health and social care workers during COVID-19. *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health* **2021**, *18*, 815. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
17. Mishna, F.; Milne, E.; Bogo, M.; Pereira, L.F. Responding to COVID-19: New trends in social workers' use of information and communication technology. *Clin. Soc. Work J.* **2021**, *49*, 484–494. [[CrossRef](#)]
18. Putnam, R.D. Bowling alone: America's declining social capital. *J. Democr.* **1995**, *6*, 65–78. [[CrossRef](#)]
19. Coleman, J.S. *Foundations of Social Theory*; Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, USA, 1990.

20. Nahapiet, J.; Ghoshal, S. Social capital, intellectual capital, and the organizational advantage. *Acad. Manag. Rev.* **1998**, *23*, 242–266. [[CrossRef](#)]
21. Mänttari-van der Kuip, M. The deteriorating work-related well-being among statutory social workers in a rigorous economic context. *Eur. J. Soc. Work* **2014**, *17*, 672–688. [[CrossRef](#)]
22. Shier, M.L.; Graham, J.R. Work-related factors that impact social work practitioners' subjective well-being: Well-being in the workplace. *J. Soc. Work* **2011**, *11*, 402–421. [[CrossRef](#)]
23. Biggart, L.; Ward, E.; Cook, L.; Schofield, G. The team as a secure base: Promoting resilience and competence in child and family social work. *Child. Youth Serv. Rev.* **2017**, *83*, 119–130. [[CrossRef](#)]
24. Winter, K.; Morrison, F.; Cree, V.; Ruch, G.; Hadfield, M.; Hallett, S. Emotional labour in social workers' encounters with children and their families. *Br. J. Soc. Work* **2019**, *49*, 217–233. [[CrossRef](#)]
25. Collins, S. Statutory social workers: Stress, job satisfaction, coping, social support and individual differences. *Br. J. Soc. Work* **2008**, *38*, 1173–1193. [[CrossRef](#)]
26. Scourfield, J.; Pithouse, A. Lay and professional knowledge in social work: Reflections from ethnographic research on child protection. *Eur. J. Soc. Work* **2006**, *9*, 323–337. [[CrossRef](#)]
27. McFadden, P.; Mallett, J.; Campbell, A.; Taylor, B. Explaining self-reported resilience in child-protection social work: The role of organisational factors, demographic information and job characteristics. *Br. J. Soc. Work* **2019**, *49*, 198–216. [[CrossRef](#)]
28. Avby, G.; Nilsen, P.; Ellström, P.E. Knowledge use and learning in everyday social work practice: A study in child investigation work. *Child Fam. Soc. Work* **2017**, *22*, 51–61. [[CrossRef](#)]
29. Savolainen, I.; Oksa, R.; Savela, N.; Celuch, M.; Oksanen, A. Covid-19 Anxiety— A longitudinal survey study of psychological and situational risks among Finnish workers. *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health* **2021**, *18*, 794. [[CrossRef](#)]
30. Wang, B.; Liu, Y.; Qian, J.; Parker, S.K. Achieving effective remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic: A work design perspective. *Appl. Psychol.* **2021**, *70*, 16–59. [[CrossRef](#)]
31. Putnam, R.D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*; Simon & Schuster: New York, NY, USA, 2000.
32. Eliacin, J.; Flanagan, M.; Monroe-DeVita, M.; Wasmuth, S.; Salyers, M.P.; Rollins, A.L. Social capital and burnout among mental healthcare providers. *J. Ment. Health* **2018**, *27*, 388–394. [[CrossRef](#)]
33. Fujita, S.; Kawakami, N.; Ando, E.; Inoue, A.; Tsuno, K.; Kurioka, S.; Kawachi, I. The association of workplace social capital with work engagement of employees in health care settings. *J. Occup. Environ. Med.* **2016**, *58*, 265–271. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
34. Meng, A.; Clausen, T.; Borg, V. The association between team-level social capital and individual-level work engagement: Differences between subtypes of social capital and the impact of intra-team agreement. *Scand. J. Psychol.* **2018**, *59*, 198–205. [[CrossRef](#)]
35. Clopton, A.W. Social capital and team performance. *Team Perform. Manag.* **2011**, *17*, 369–381. [[CrossRef](#)]
36. Burt, R.S. *Structural Holes: The Social Structure of Competition*; Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, USA, 1992.
37. Granovetter, M.S. The strength of weak ties. *Am. J. Sociol.* **1973**, *78*, 1360–1380. [[CrossRef](#)]
38. Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK. *The Ethical Principles of Research with Human Participants and Ethical Review in the Human Sciences in Finland: Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK Guidelines 2019*, 2nd ed.; Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK: Helsinki, Finland, 2019. Available online: https://tenk.fi/sites/default/files/2021-01/Ethical_review_in_human_sciences_2020.pdf (accessed on 19 October 2021).
39. Finell, E.; Vainio, A. The combined effect of perceived covid-19 infection risk at work and identification with work community with psychosocial wellbeing among Finnish social sector and health care workers. *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health* **2020**, *17*, 7623. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
40. Robert, L.P.; Dennis, A.R.; Ahuja, M.K. Social capital and knowledge integration in digitally enabled teams. *Inf. Syst. Res.* **2008**, *19*, 314–334. [[CrossRef](#)]