

Unravelling the intricacies of semiotics in social work: A novel approach to enhancing client understanding and intervention

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Signs and symbols are omnipresent, significantly impacting individual and community well-being and are critical in various fields including social work, behavioural sciences, and human rights. This paper discusses the role of semiotics in social work, focusing on how semiotics can contribute to more effective and equitable client assessments and interventions. It also explores the use of semiotics in multicultural social work practice. Adding to this, the paper delves into the often-underestimated power of signs and symbols in shaping perceptions and influencing human behaviour. It emphasises the necessity for social workers to be adept at decoding these symbols to better understand and support their clients. The paper also highlights the potential of semiotics to bridge communication gaps, particularly in culturally diverse settings, thereby fostering a more inclusive and understanding environment. Moreover, it suggests that a semiotic approach could revolutionise traditional methods of assessment and intervention in social work, making them more client-centered and effective. Through case studies and theoretical exploration, this paper offers a comprehensive analysis of semiotics' applications in social work, advocating for its integration into practice and education to enhance the effectiveness and sensitivity of social work interventions.

Keywords: behavioural sciences; client assessment; multicultural practice; semiotics; social work

Semiotics, the study of signs and symbols, offers a potent yet underutilised lens for enhancing social work practice (Gretzel et al., 2019). Originally defined by Ferdinand de Saussure (2011) as "the science of the life of signs in society," semiotics encompasses a vast array of human signifying practices, shaping our understanding of social and cultural phenomena (Knight et al., 2019). In social work, practitioners are constantly decoding an intricate web of verbal and nonverbal cues, behaviours, cultural artifacts, and environmental contexts (Esposito et al., 2015). However, the formal integration of semiotic theory and analysis in social work education and practice has been relatively sparse. This shortfall presents a substantial missed opportunity, considering the profound impact that a focused application of a semiotic lens can have on understanding clients, their presenting issues, and their socio-cultural contexts, thereby enriching assessments, informing interventions, and ultimately enhancing client outcomes.

Exploring the semiotic landscape in social work is a journey into the realm of meanings, symbols, and interpretations, providing a new perspective on human interaction and communication. It emphasises the importance of understanding the subtle nuances and meanings behind words, gestures, and social cues in different cultural contexts (Laungani, 2004). Social workers, equipped with this understanding, can more effectively engage with their clients, appreciating the layered complexities of their experiences and narratives. By recognising the cultural and social factors that shape individual perceptions and behaviours, social workers can tailor their approaches to be more culturally sensitive and effective. This incorporation of semiotics into social work practice fosters a deeper, more empathetic understanding of clients, paving the way for more nuanced and impactful interventions.

Social semiotics, a branch of semiotics, delves into human signifying practices within specific social and cultural settings, seeking to explain meaning-making as a social practice (Lin & Chen, 2023). This field expands on Saussure's foundational insights by highlighting how the "codes" of language and communication, pivotal in social work practice, are formed and continually reshaped by social processes. The implication is that meanings and semiotic systems are not static but are influenced by the dynamics of power relations within society. As these power structures shift, so do our languages and other systems of socially accepted meanings, presenting a dynamic landscape for social workers to navigate.

Between these distinct perspectives lies a crucial understanding: social semiotics is not merely about the interpretation of existing signs and symbols but also involves an active process of creating and negotiating new meanings (Vannini, 2007). This creative aspect of social semiotics is especially pertinent in social work, where practitioners and clients are often involved in co-constructing narratives and solutions. Social workers, informed by social semiotic principles, become more attuned to the ways in which individuals and communities use symbols and language to assert their identity, resist dominant narratives, and articulate their experiences (Relajo-Howell & Stoyanova, 2019). This awareness enables social workers to better support their clients in articulating their stories and experiences in ways that are empowering and validating. It also helps them recognise the evolving nature of language and symbols within different cultural and social groups, thereby facilitating more effective and culturally responsive communication (Baumeister & Masicampo, 2010).

Furthermore, social semiotics involves the study of how individuals and societies design and interpret meanings. It engages with texts and how semiotic systems are moulded by social interests and ideologies, adapting as society evolves. This perspective diverges from structuralist semiotics, which focused on theorising semiotic systems or structures as relatively unchanging entities. Social semiotics, by contrast, acknowledges the variability and adaptability of semiotic practices. It underscores how individual creativity, historical circumstances, and new social identities can influence and modify patterns of usage and design (Guttman & Relajo-Howell, 2022). In this regard, social semiotics intersects with and draws upon the fields of pragmatics, sociolinguistics, cultural studies, and critical discourse analysis.

This expansion into the realm of multimodal semiotics highlights the complex interplay between various forms of communication in contemporary society (Yamada-Rice, 2014). In this context, social workers are called upon to be not just listeners and speakers, but also interpreters of a broader spectrum of communicative modes. They must decode and understand the meanings conveyed through images, sounds, and digital platforms, which are increasingly integral to people's lives. This multimodal approach is particularly relevant when working with younger clients or those immersed in digital cultures, where communication often transcends traditional linguistic boundaries. By embracing a multimodal semiotic perspective, social workers can gain deeper insights into their

clients' worlds, understanding not just what is said, but also what is conveyed through other means. This holistic approach is vital in building effective, empathetic, and culturally sensitive relationships with clients, enabling social workers to respond more effectively to the diverse and evolving ways people communicate and express themselves in the modern world.

In contemporary times, social semiotics is expanding its scope to include the burgeoning importance of sound and visual images in both traditional and digital media, such as the semiotics of social networking (Cazden et al., 1996). Theorists like Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen have extended Halliday's framework to develop new "grammars" for various semiotic modes beyond language (see Kress et al., 1997). These grammars, like language, are seen as socially constructed and mutable sets of resources for making meaning, shaped by the semiotic metafunctions identified by Halliday. The focus on multimodality, which involves communication across a range of semiotic modes (verbal, visual, aural), is particularly pertinent given the dominance of the visual mode in contemporary communication (Relojo et al., 2016). As highlighted by Harrison (2003), this aspect is crucial for social workers who must interpret a diverse array of communicative signals from clients, including non-verbal and digital expressions.

This emerging focus on semiotics within social work also underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding of communication and interaction in the digital age. As people increasingly engage with digital media, social workers must adapt their skills to interpret the complex semiotic landscapes presented online. Digital platforms offer unique challenges and opportunities in understanding client experiences, particularly in the realm of online identity construction, social networking, and digital storytelling. Social workers, by understanding the semiotic principles that govern digital communication, can better appreciate how clients represent themselves and their experiences online. This awareness is crucial in contexts where digital interactions play a significant role in individuals' lives, affecting their mental health, social relationships, and self-perception. The inclusion of digital semiotics in social work practice not only enriches the understanding of client narratives but also equips practitioners with the tools to engage effectively in increasingly digitalised social environments.

This study aims to bridge the gap in the literature by investigating social worker perspectives on and experiences with semiotics in practice. It is anchored in seminal semiotic theory, positing that meaning emanates from the interplay between signifiers (the physical signs conveying information) and the signified (the underlying concepts these signs represent). A semiotic approach provides conceptual tools to decode the multitude of signs embedded in client narratives, behaviours, environments, cultural backgrounds, and social discourses. The ability to "read" these signs can unveil insights and meanings that may be obscured at the surface level, enhancing empathic understanding and communication. This research highlights the latent capacity of semiotics to amplify social workers' interpretive acumen when deliberately employed as a conceptual framework, revealing psychosocial dynamics that are often not immediately apparent.

The methodology of this research includes qualitative interviews and case studies, aiming to gather in-depth insights from experienced social workers. These narratives are examined to uncover how semiotics is utilised in various aspects of social work, from initial client assessments to the ongoing development of therapeutic relationships. The research also explores the challenges and opportunities presented by semiotic analysis in social work contexts. It seeks to understand how social workers interpret and apply semiotic theories in practice, particularly in diverse and multicultural settings. By analyzing these real-world applications, the study aims to demonstrate the practical relevance of semiotics in social work, providing evidence-based strategies for its integration into the field. This approach not only contributes to the theoretical understanding of semiotics in social work but also offers a pragmatic guide for practitioners looking to incorporate these principles into their practice.

By emphasising the value of semiotics within the social work canon, this study advocates for its more pronounced integration into education and training (Rutten et al., 2010). The ability to discern semiotic clues with precision can lead to more nuanced assessments, culturally resonant practices, and, ultimately, improved services and outcomes. This study endeavours to elevate semiotics from a peripheral concept to a central tenet in social work, thereby enriching the understanding of meaning processes that can uplift the power and potential of the field.

METHODOLOGY

Considering the complex nature of interpreting signs and symbols, a qualitative research design was deemed most suitable for this study. The qualitative approach's inherent flexibility and exploratory nature allow an in-depth understanding of the participant's experiences and perceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

This qualitative approach was operationalised through semi-structured interviews, enabling participants to share their experiences and insights in their own words, thus revealing the nuances of semiotic application in social work. To enhance the depth of data, focus groups were also employed, encouraging discussion and the exchange of perspectives among social workers from varied backgrounds. These methods were complemented by observational studies in select social work settings, providing a real-time glimpse into how semiotics is applied in practice. The data collected were then subjected to thematic analysis, allowing for the identification and interpretation of key themes related to the use and understanding of semiotics in social work. This comprehensive approach ensured a rich, multi-faceted exploration of the subject, providing valuable insights into the practical and theoretical applications of semiotics in the field of social work.

Data collection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and case studies. The semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face or via video call, depending on the participants' preference and convenience. The interviews, lasting approximately 60 minutes, were guided by an interview protocol developed to explore participants' experiences and interpretations of signs within their practice. Questions included: "Can you share a situation where you felt that understanding a specific sign or symbol enhanced your understanding of the client's situation?" and "How does your cultural and personal understanding of signs and symbols influence your practice?"

The integration of semiotics in social work was a central focus of these interviews. This approach highlights the significance of signs and symbols in understanding human behaviour and social interactions. By delving into the practitioners' experiences, the study aimed to uncover how the interpretation of various signs and symbols could potentially inform and enhance social work practices.

Case studies were obtained from the participants' past or present cases, with all identifying information removed to ensure client confidentiality. These case studies explored how semiotics could be applied in real-life social work practice.

The following questions were asked to the participants:

1. Could you discuss an experience where understanding a particular sign or symbol enhanced your perception of a client's situation?
2. How does your personal and cultural understanding of signs and symbols influence your work?
3. Can you provide a case where interpreting environmental signs helped you discover a hidden issue?
4. What are your thoughts on how a deeper understanding of semiotics could benefit the field of social work?

Data analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded, with the participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions, along with the case studies, were then subjected to a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis, a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data, offers a flexible and valuable research tool that provides a rich and detailed account of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

To ensure the credibility and validity of the findings, the researcher employed several qualitative verification strategies. This included member checking, where participants were given the opportunity to review the analysis and provide feedback, ensuring that the interpretations accurately reflected their experiences and perspectives. The researcher also conducted peer debriefing, discussing the findings and the analytical process with external experts in qualitative research and semiotics. Reflective journaling was another key strategy, where the researcher documented thoughts, decisions, and challenges encountered during the study, serving as an audit trail and adding transparency to the

research process. This rigorous approach to verification helped to mitigate potential biases and ensured a robust and reliable analysis of the data.

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step guide to conducting thematic analysis, the researchers familiarised themselves with the data, generated initial codes, searched for themes among the codes, reviewed themes, defined and named themes, and produced the report. Coding and theme development were done both inductively (from the data) and deductively (from the theoretical framework of semiotics).

In line with the principles of thematic analysis, the research process was iterative and reflexive, allowing for a deep engagement with the data. The researcher continuously moved back and forth between the collected data and emerging themes, ensuring a thorough exploration of the content. This approach was crucial for maintaining sensitivity to the nuances and complexities inherent in the data. The inductive coding allowed themes to emerge organically from the participants' narratives, while the deductive coding ensured that these themes were also examined through the lens of existing semiotic theory. This dual approach enriched the analysis, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of how semiotics is perceived and utilised by social work professionals in their practice.

This methodology section presents the qualitative approach adopted in this study to explore the application and potential of semiotics in social work. The semi-structured interviews and case studies provided rich data, which were then systematically analyzed through thematic analysis.

Participants

Participants were drawn from a pool of practicing social workers with at least five years of professional experience across various domains such as child welfare, mental health, and community development. The diversity of participants allowed for a broad range of experiences and interpretations, thus enriching the data.

Case studies were obtained from the participants' past or present cases, with all identifying information removed to ensure client confidentiality. These case studies explored how semiotics could be applied in real-life social work practice.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study uncovers several significant themes regarding integrating semiotics in social work. These themes emphasise semiotics' latent capability to enhance our comprehension of clients' experiences, thereby boosting the effectiveness of the interventions.

One prominent theme identified was the power of non-verbal communication in understanding clients' emotions and thoughts. Social workers highlighted how subtle gestures, facial expressions, and body language often conveyed more than words could, especially in cases where clients struggled to articulate their feelings. Another key theme revolved around the cultural nuances of semiotics, underscoring the importance of cultural competence in interpreting signs and symbols accurately within diverse client populations.

The study also revealed the challenges social workers face in deciphering ambiguous or conflicting signs, highlighting the need for continuous learning and adaptation in their approach. Additionally, the integration of digital semiotics was seen as increasingly vital, reflecting the growing influence of online communication on clients' lives. These themes collectively illustrate the multifaceted role of semiotics in enhancing the depth and breadth of social work practice.

Underutilisation of semiotics in social work practice

A significant finding was the apparent underutilisation of semiotics within social work practice. Despite acknowledging the omnipresence of signs and symbols in daily life, many participants reported that they did not consciously apply a semiotic lens in their practice. This suggests a potential gap in social work training and education, highlighting the need for explicit semiotic instruction and training.

Moreover, participants expressed a desire for more practical tools and frameworks to apply semiotics in various social work contexts. They pointed out that while theoretical knowledge of semiotics was valuable, there was a lack of guidance on how to implement this knowledge effectively in real-world situations. This gap often left social workers relying on intuition rather than structured semiotic analysis. The findings also indicated that when semiotics was employed, it significantly enhanced client understanding and the overall effectiveness of interventions. Thus, there was a consensus among participants on the potential benefits of integrating semiotics more deeply into social work practice, both as a diagnostic tool and as a means to develop more empathetic and effective client relationships.

The impact of semiotics on understanding and intervention

Participants noted marked improvements in understanding their clients when semiotics was applied, consciously or unconsciously. By decoding signs and symbols within varying contexts – personal, social, and cultural – social workers can glean more nuanced information, thus leading to more targeted interventions. One participant said, "When I started to pay attention to the signs my clients were giving, both verbal and non-verbal, I felt like I was finally seeing the full picture."

This heightened awareness, they noted, often led to breakthroughs in cases where traditional methods had stalled. For example, understanding a client's use of specific symbols or metaphors could unlock deeper emotional issues or cultural values that were previously overlooked. Another participant highlighted how semiotic analysis helped in bridging communication gaps, especially with clients from different cultural backgrounds, where certain gestures or expressions might hold different meanings. The study also found that semiotics enhanced social workers' self-awareness, making them more mindful of their own communicative signals and biases. This, in turn, improved the quality of interactions with clients, fostering a more trusting and open therapeutic environment. Overall, the participants' experiences underscored the transformative potential of semiotics in enriching social work practice.

Semiotics in multicultural settings

The study's findings also underscored the role of semiotics in multicultural settings. Social workers could bridge cultural gaps and develop more appropriate interventions by understanding and interpreting culturally specific signs and symbols. One participant working with immigrant families noted, "You need to understand their signs, their symbols - it is like learning a new language. Moreover, you can serve them so much better when you do."

In addition to bridging cultural divides, the application of semiotics in multicultural settings was also found to enhance the overall therapeutic alliance between social workers and their clients. The ability to interpret and respect culturally-specific non-verbal cues, rituals, and traditions often led to stronger relationships, as clients felt their unique cultural identity was being valued and understood. Social workers reported that this level of cultural empathy and understanding was crucial in establishing trust, particularly in initial meetings and assessments. The study further revealed that semiotic sensitivity in multicultural interactions often provided key insights into clients' backgrounds and current challenges, enabling more tailored and culturally sensitive intervention strategies. This aspect of semiotics was especially beneficial in settings with diverse populations, where a one-size-fits-all approach to social work practice is less effective. This nuanced understanding of cultural semiotics, therefore, emerged as a vital skill for social workers aiming to provide inclusive and responsive care in increasingly diverse societies.

This deeper understanding of cultural semiotics not only enhanced communication but also increased clients' comfort and trust in the social work process. Participants observed that clients felt more understood and respected when their cultural symbols and expressions were acknowledged and incorporated into the therapeutic dialogue. This was particularly impactful in communities where verbal communication might be limited due to language barriers or cultural norms. Furthermore, the study highlighted how semiotic competence enabled social workers to identify and challenge cultural stereotypes and biases, leading to more equitable and effective practices. By being attuned to the diverse semiotic landscapes of their clients' cultures, social workers were better positioned to advocate for their needs and facilitate their integration into broader social contexts.

The role of environmental signs

The recognition of environmental signs emerged as another critical theme in the study. Social workers reported how attention to signs in a client's environment, such as their living conditions, could reveal underlying issues that might go unnoticed. For instance, one social worker shared a case where noticing recurring signs of disarray in a client's home led to identifying previously undisclosed domestic violence.

This attention to environmental signs extends beyond the physical space to include the broader social and community contexts in which clients live (Yanow, 2015). Social workers noted that understanding the semiotic landscapes of neighbourhoods, schools, and community spaces could provide important clues about the social dynamics and pressures affecting clients. For example, the presence of certain symbols or graffiti in a neighborhood might indicate underlying tensions or community values that are crucial for understanding a client's experiences and challenges. This broader environmental perspective encourages social workers to think beyond the individual, considering how external factors shape and influence clients' lives (e.g., Binder, 2007). It also highlights the importance of a holistic approach in social work, where environmental awareness complements direct client interactions, leading to more comprehensive assessments and interventions. This expanded focus on environmental semiotics thus plays a key role in deepening social workers' understanding of the complex ecosystems in which their clients exist.

These findings demonstrate the potential value of integrating semiotics within social work practice. While the concept appears underutilised, the instances where it has been applied, whether consciously or unconsciously, reveal a significant impact on understanding clients and devising effective interventions. As such, the results indicate that a more systematic application of semiotics within social work could substantially improve practice.

Summary of the findings

The study highlights several key themes in integrating semiotics into social work, demonstrating its potential to enhance understanding and intervention effectiveness. A major theme is the significance of non-verbal communication in comprehending clients' emotions and thoughts. Social workers noted how gestures, facial expressions, and body language often convey critical information, particularly in cases where clients have difficulty articulating their feelings. Additionally, the cultural nuances of semiotics were emphasised, with a focus on the importance of cultural competence in interpreting signs and symbols within diverse client populations. The study also acknowledged the challenges in deciphering ambiguous or conflicting signs and the growing importance of digital semiotics.

Despite the recognised importance of semiotics, its application in social work practice appears underutilised. Many social workers do not consciously apply a semiotic lens in their practice, indicating a gap in training and education. Participants expressed a need for more practical tools and frameworks to implement semiotic knowledge effectively in various social work contexts. However, when used, semiotics significantly enhanced client understanding and the effectiveness of interventions.

The impact of semiotics on understanding and intervention was evident. Social workers reported improvements in understanding their clients by decoding signs and symbols within personal, social, and cultural contexts. This led to more targeted interventions and breakthroughs in challenging cases. The study found that semiotic analysis helped bridge communication gaps, particularly with culturally diverse clients, and enhanced social workers' self-awareness, improving client interactions.

In multicultural settings, semiotics played a crucial role in bridging cultural gaps and developing more appropriate interventions. Understanding culturally specific signs and symbols was likened to learning a new language, enhancing therapeutic alliances, and establishing trust. Semiotic sensitivity provided key insights into clients' backgrounds and challenges, enabling tailored and culturally sensitive intervention strategies. This aspect of semiotics proved especially beneficial in settings with diverse populations.

Furthermore, the study emphasised the role of environmental signs. Social workers reported that attention to signs in a client's environment, such as living conditions, could reveal underlying issues. This extended to understanding semiotic landscapes of neighbourhoods and community spaces, providing insights into social dynamics affecting clients. This broader environmental perspective

supports a holistic approach in social work, leading to more comprehensive assessments and interventions.

In summary, the study demonstrates the potential value of integrating semiotics within social work practice. The findings suggest that a more systematic application of semiotics could substantially improve social work practice, making it more effective and responsive to clients' needs in diverse and evolving social contexts.

LIMITATIONS

While this research provides significant insights into the potential of semiotics in enhancing social work practice, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations and suggest directions for future research.

This study's primary limitations are its small sample size and the inherent subjectivity of qualitative research and semiotic interpretation. The findings could be more generalisable with a more extensive and diverse sample. In addition, interpreting signs and symbols is a highly subjective process influenced by the interpreter's personal, cultural, and social backgrounds. Therefore, what one social worker interprets as a specific sign might be interpreted differently by another. This subjectivity can enrich and limit the findings, as the interpretations may not be universally applicable.

The results of this study pave the way for several avenues for future research. One of the most pressing needs is to validate these findings with larger, more diverse samples. It would also be beneficial to conduct comparative studies across different cultures and contexts to explore how the interpretation and application of semiotics vary.

Moreover, there is scope to develop and test semiotics-based training modules for social work education. Future research could explore the effectiveness of such training in enhancing social workers' understanding of their clients and the overall effectiveness of their interventions. It would also be interesting to examine the potential of semiotics in specific areas of social work, such as child welfare, mental health, or work with immigrant communities.

Finally, future studies could explore the potential of semiotics in client communication and education, helping clients understand their circumstances and potential solutions more effectively.

This study is a starting point for a more extensive exploration of semiotics in social work. It opens the door to future research, pedagogical developments, and potentially more effective, nuanced social work practice.

CONCLUSION

The data gleaned from this research highlight the untapped potential of semiotics in social work. By interpreting the myriad of signs in a client's environment, social workers can better understand their clients' experiences. This understanding, in turn, leads to developing more effective, personalised interventions. In essence, semiotics empowers social workers to "read between the lines," to see beyond the surface-level presentations, and to grasp the more nuanced aspects of their client's experiences.

Our findings suggest that social workers, even unconsciously, engage in semiotic interpretations in their practice. However, this engagement often occurs with a formal understanding of semiotics or intentional application. This lack of formal recognition and training in semiotics may be a missed opportunity to enhance social work practice. Findings indicate that knowingly incorporating semiotics can yield better client understanding and outcomes.

Given these findings, we argue for integrating semiotics into social work curricula. Understanding semiotics can equip social workers with a powerful tool to decode the symbols and signs that shape human experiences. As one of our participants aptly noted, "Understanding semiotics is like learning a new language, one that helps you see what was previously invisible."

While this study sheds light on the potential of semiotics in social work, it is also essential to acknowledge the limitations of our research. As a qualitative study with small sample size, our findings

cannot be generalised. However, they provide valuable insights and pave the way for further exploration into this topic. We recommend that future research involve a larger, more diverse sample size to validate these findings further.

In conclusion, this research makes a compelling case for integrating semiotics into social work practice. It demonstrates how, by decoding the signs and symbols in our clients' lives, we can develop a more nuanced understanding of their experiences. This understanding can lead to more effective interventions, thus enhancing the overall effectiveness of social work practice. Our study will encourage further exploration into this promising avenue and ultimately contribute to the evolution of social work practice.

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