



# What is Social Work?

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5th Edition

# What is Social Work?

Contexts and Perspectives

Nigel Horner





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# About the author

**Nigel Horner** is Head of the School of Health and Social Care at the University of Lincoln, where he has worked since 2007. The School delivers a broad portfolio of qualifying and post-qualifying programmes in Health and Social Care, Midwifery, Nursing, Occupational Therapy, Paramedic Science, Physiotherapy and Social Work.

Nigel began his social work career as a residential childcare worker in South London before moving into community work in Sunderland and then qualifying in social work at Glasgow University. He subsequently worked for Lincolnshire County Council in various childcare and mental health settings, before becoming a Training Officer and working in policy and development, particularly in relation to children's services.

Nigel first published *What is Social Work?* in 2003, followed by *Social Work in Education and Children's Services* (2006) (also published by Learning Matters) and *Essential Theory for Social Work Practice* (Chris Beckett and Nigel Horner, 2015, 2nd edition, published by Sage).



# Dedication

For the youngest and oldest in my family: my two granddaughters, Darcey (born North London, 2014) and Florrie (born North London, 2016), and for my mother Bidy (born South London, 1925).

# Series editor's preface

During recent teaching sessions for student social workers I have been struck keenly by the changes permeating our contemporary world. Values and ethics lie at the heart of social work and social work education, and we address these throughout all the books in the series. The positions that we take in terms of values and ethics is, to an extent, determined by context, time and experience and these are expressed in different ways by students coming into social work education today. Since the turn of this century we have witnessed shifts and challenges as the marketised neoliberal landscape of politics, economy and social life may attract little comment or contest from some. We have observed the political machinery directing much of statutory social work towards a focus on individuals apart from their environment. However, we have also seen a new turn to the social in the #MeToo campaign where unquestioned entitlement to women's bodies and psychology is exposed and resisted. We have seen defiance of those perpetuating social injustices that see long-term migrants alongside today's migrants abused and shunned by society, institutions as well as individuals. It is likely that, as a student of social work, you will lay bare and face many previously unquestioned assumptions which can be very perplexing and uncover needs for learning, support and understanding. This series of books acts as an aid as you make these steps. Each book stands in a long and international tradition of social work that promotes social justice and human rights, introducing you to the importance of sometimes new and difficult concepts, and inculcating the importance of close questioning of yourself as you make your journey towards becoming part of that tradition.

There are numerous contemporary challenges for the wider world, and for all four countries of the UK. These include political shifts to the 'popular' Right, a growing antipathy to care and support, and dealing with lies and 'alternative truths' in our daily lives. Alongside this is the need to address the impact of an increasingly ageing population with its attendant social care needs and working with the financial implications that such a changing demography brings. At the other end of the lifespan the need for high-quality childcare, welfare and safeguarding services has been highlighted as society develops and responds to the changing complexion. As demand rises so do the costs and the unquestioned assumption that austerity measures are necessary continues to create tensions and restrictions in services, policies and expectations.

It is likely that as a social worker you will work with a diverse range of people throughout your career, many of whom have experienced significant, even traumatic, events that require a professional and caring response. As well as working with individuals, however, you may be required to respond to the needs of a particular community disadvantaged by local, national or world events or groups excluded within their local communities because of assumptions made about them.

The importance of high-quality social work education remains if we are adequately to address the complexities of modern life. We should continually strive for excellence in education as this allows us to focus clearly on what knowledge it is useful to engage with when learning to be a social worker. Questioning everything, especially from a position of knowledge, is central to being a social worker.

The books in this series respond to the agendas driven by changes brought about by professional bodies, governments and disciplinary reviews. They aim to build on and offer introductory texts based on up-to-date knowledge and to help communicate this in an accessible way, so preparing the ground for future study and for encouraging good practice as you develop your social work career. Each book is written by someone passionate about social work and social services and aims to instil that passion in others. Nigel Horner's seminal text introduces you to the history, contexts and core concepts in contemporary social work. His book will help you to understand the place social work has in contemporary British society and the place you will have within it. You may think that knowledge of the history and policy context of social work is somewhat tangential to practice. Horner's book will show why it is central to good social work practice.

Professor Jonathan Parker  
November 2018

# Preface to the fifth edition

The first edition of this book was published in 2003, with the second edition being produced in 2006, the third in 2009 and the fourth in 2012. With the passing of the years, the book merits a substantial further updating, not least to reflect the seismic changes that have continued to sweep across the social work and social care landscapes. I am naturally delighted and honoured to be asked to write a fifth edition of this book, particularly as it has hitherto proved to be a popular introduction to social work practice, valued by those considering a career in social work, those already engaged in social care and other allied arenas of the human services, those applying for qualifying social work programmes, those already in training, and finally for practitioners, trainers, practice educators and assessors and service managers. I do hope this new edition will have a similarly broad appeal and prove to be equally valued.

This fifth edition has been updated and, wherever appropriate, facts, figures and data have been revised, as have the recommended readings and the appendices. The core message of the book is to affirm and confirm that while the essence of social work practice remains remarkably constant, it is the contexts within which practice takes place that continue to be radically transformed.

At the time of writing, the Conservative government is grappling with the consequences of the European Union membership referendum conducted in June 2016 and resulting in a decision to leave the EU (commonly known as 'Brexit'). Previous policy announcements highly relevant to the well-being and future of Social Work – such as the decision to establish a new regulator for the profession, to advance Health and Social Care integration, to advance ideas about regional devolution – have all stalled or been significantly amended in the wake of Brexit while the British people, and its elected representatives, continue to work out what kind of Brexit is going to be delivered from 2019 onwards.

When the last edition of this book was published in 2012, the Health Care Professions Council and the now defunct College of Social Work were implementing the final confirmed findings of the Social Work Reform Board, which was established to implement the 15 recommendations of the Social Work Taskforce as published in Autumn 2009 in the wake of the death of Peter Connolly. This had been intended to be 'a nuts and bolts' review of front-line social work practice and to make recommendations for immediate improvements to practice and training as well as long-term change in social work. In the intervening period, albeit with no formal change in official policies concerning Social Work as a regulated profession, significant changes have taken place. Apart from the government's stated intention to establish a new regulator for Social Work (Social Work England), nudge economics is supporting the inexorable shift towards Social Work as a postgraduate entry profession, with the funded support for *Frontline*, *Think Ahead* and *Step Up* schemes.

Furthermore, the advent of Social Work Partnership schemes, with their explicit focus on statutory placements, means a greater retrenchment of modern Social Work formations – or at least those explicitly supported by government – around an ever narrowing range of crucial but nevertheless limited statutory interventions, all of which serves to locate British social work in a domain that is at notable odds with European or international professional models. The final chapter of this edition will revisit the remit of the original Taskforce, the published recommendations and the work of the Reform Board and will offer some further thoughts as to what this all means in terms of the currently misty and murky vision for Social Work and social workers. This is particularly relevant for new entrants to Social Work: whether as applicants, students, newly registered practitioners or indeed returners to practice. In England, around four thousand social work students complete their training and register as qualified practitioners per annum, arriving at the point of beginning their careers via an increasingly diverse range of routes. Where are these former students now working and what changes are taking place in the employment landscape?

Generic teams and integrated social services departments have become lost in the mist of the past that is at once very recent and yet a long time in terms of policy and political shifts. New students just embarking on their social work qualifying programmes will emerge in two or three years into organisational structures fundamentally different to those currently in existence. Children's services are becoming increasingly diverse and fragmented. Adult social services in a number of localities are retrenching into strategic commissioning authorities, with service delivery undertaken by a myriad of third-sector, not-for-profit or charitable organisations. Whether they employ qualified social workers to undertake their contracted functions remains to be seen. As we have noted in previous editions, some commentators may indeed welcome these developments, seeing them as a sign of a maturing profession that confidently plies its trade under the protected title of 'registered social worker' and which operates in increasingly complex and diverse settings. Others, however, will see in every change a further diminishing of Social Work's sense of confidence in itself as it becomes ever marginalised and potentially eclipsed by new types of workers.

As in the previous four editions, this book is about the twin themes of continuity and change. In one sense, it is the profound difficulty of the job that remains a constant. As Rosie Varley, Chair of the former regulatory body the General Social Care Council, noted some years ago: *Tragedies such as the death of Baby P {Peter Connolly} and other recent cases remind us how immensely challenging the role of a social worker is. We need to attract the best people into the profession with a diverse workforce that reflects the society we live in* (GSCC press release, 4 February 2009). Over the past nine years, everything and nothing has changed. Governments, ministers and even departments have been and gone, the regulators have changed, new routes to qualification have been developed, organisations have been overhauled, funding regimes altered: what changes are the organisational contexts of employment, the policies, the procedures, the technologies of information-gathering and recording, the assessment formats and the jargon-filled narratives that impede

effective communication between professions Yet in essence the song remains the same. Every tragedy, every serious case review, every inquiry reminds us, above all, what a profoundly difficult job social work is, for which we need to attract the best people to join the profession. What also remains constant are the contested and debated questions concerning who are ‘the best people’, how should they be trained and accredited and how should they be supported and sustained to give the best of themselves in the service of others. After all, doing good Social Work is not rocket science: it is more difficult than that! You can build a rocket by following an admittedly complex manual, but a manual none the less. Follow the rules and the rocket will take off and fly. There is no such certainty in Social Work.

In the context of the above changes and constants, practitioners and students are having to continually revisit and reflect upon the question *What is Social Work?* as we struggle to find new ways of working with children and their families in a post-Munro Report world, as we endeavour to take forward the Personalisation/Independent Living agenda in the wake of the 2014 Care Act, as we cautiously engage with Health and Social Care Integration and the NHS’s *Five Year Forward View* which reimagines substantial change to the way health and social care is delivered in England.

When given the opportunity, in the face of such changes, we envisage practitioners will wish to engage in the discussions with a confident exposition of social work’s distinctive and indispensable purpose. We ask applicants to our programmes to tell us what they think social work is. A recent applicant for the postgraduate qualifying social degree at our university wrote in her essay: *The goal of social work is to positively affect lives, to improve lives, to protect lives and, in the most extreme cases, to save lives.* I wish I had written that: it says so much, so eloquently and so succinctly. It is indeed an answer to the question: ‘What is Social Work?’

I humbly hope that this edition will help you, the reader, develop your own confident understanding of Social Work so you can play your part in taking forward this noble and crucial profession.

# The Professional Capabilities Framework

This book has been carefully mapped to the new Professional Capabilities Framework for Social Workers in England and will help you to develop the appropriate standards at the right level. These standards are:

- **Professionalism**  
Identify and behave as a professional social worker, committed to professional development.
- **Values and ethics**  
Apply social work ethical principles and values to guide professional practice.
- **Diversity and equality**  
Recognise diversity and apply anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive principles in practice.
- **Rights, justice and economic well-being**  
Advance human rights and promote social justice and economic well-being.
- **Knowledge**  
Develop and apply relevant knowledge from social work practice and research, social sciences, law, other professional and relevant fields, and from the experience of people who use services.
- **Critical reflection and analysis**  
Apply critical reflection and analysis to inform and provide a rationale for professional decision-making.
- **Intervention and skills**  
Use judgement, knowledge and authority to intervene with individuals, families and communities to promote independence, provide support, prevent harm and enable progress.
- **Contexts and organisations**  
Engage with, inform and adapt to changing organisational contexts, and the social and policy environments that shape practice. Operate effectively within and contribute to the development of organisations and services, including multi-agency and inter-professional settings.

What is Social Work?

- **Professional leadership**

Promote the profession and good social work practice. Take responsibility for the professional learning and development of others. Develop personal influence and be part of the collective leadership and impact of the profession.

References to these standards will be made throughout the text and you will find a diagram of the Professional Capabilities Framework in Appendix 1 at the end of the book.

Nigel Horner  
Lincoln, 2018



# Acknowledgements

I would like to thank students at the University of Lincoln for helping me develop ideas that have contributed to the further updating of this text. Furthermore, our work with partners in our EU-funded Erasmus Mundus Social Work programme has helped me to continually reflect on ‘What is Social Work?’ in a British sense, as practitioners from other countries and cultures have introduced me to such different understandings of its role, function and purpose. This new edition hopefully reflects a slightly wider gaze in trying to answer the eternal question of *What is Social Work?* Finally, I would particularly thank my colleagues Jasper Shotts, Ian Mathews, Phil Musson, Rob Goemans and Janet Walker for helping me update matters, both legal and procedural, for this edition.

